

Jasper Club



MARY COCKETT

Jasper Club

ILLUSTRATED BY

MARY SHILLABEER



HEINEMANN

LONDON MELBOURNE TORONTO

F
C-666

William Heinemann Ltd
LONDON MELBOURNE TORONTO
CAPE TOWN AUCKLAND
THE HAGUE

First published 1919

Printed in Great Britain by
Butler & Tanner Ltd
Frome and London

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Acknowledgement

Several people have most kindly given me information for certain points in this book.

Particular thanks are due to the five children who encouraged me by reading and eagerly commenting on the story when it was in manuscript.

FOR MY DEAR JUDITH + REETA .

Chapter One

It was Jay and Elspeth who 'found' the yard. If anyone had asked them what lay behind that high wall and those big double gates, they would have said without thought or interest that ~~there was~~ the yard of a factory. They had passed the closed gates hundreds of times, and the gates were still closed, but the little wicket door was open. By unspoken agreement they stopped and looked through.

'I've never seen in here before,' said Jay, and his voice was quiet.

'Neither have I.'

They stood and savoured the pleasure of finding something unknown in a district where they had both lived for a long time.

Elspeth spoke again.

'You know that lost, "unbelonging" look that stray dogs have? . . . Well, this yard has it too.'

'Yes, I was thinking it looked "forgotten".'

Down the middle, moss grew between the paving-stones. In the cobbles round the edges, coarse grass sprouted. The factory walls on the right were blank, except for two warehouse doors, one above the other, and two office windows at the end near the wicket door. The windows were grimed

with the dirt of years. Below them stood a metal crate for milk bottles: two dirty bottles still awaited collection.

Elsbeth stepped into the yard. Jay followed and shut the door. To most people it would have seemed just an empty yard. These two viewed it with wonder.

'I can't make it out,' said Jay. After a pause he went on. 'It's so near both our homes and yet we never knew about it because it was always so closed in with the long high wall and the gates. Do you think it can be as disused as it looks?'

Elsbeth's blue-grey eyes were still wide with wonder. 'I don't think anybody ever comes here. It feels as though it has been left alone for a long time.'

Jay nodded. He too felt that they were breaking a long stillness.

Warily they crossed the yard to the wall that was opposite the big gates. Over the wall, which stretched down and down on its other side, lay the river.

'It's a long drop,' Jay said. He was standing on a large slab of concrete; a chunk of rusty iron jutted from the middle. 'I suppose they had a crane here. They would load their goods straight on to the barges below. I wonder what they made and why they stopped making it.'

'I don't know,' said Elsbeth. Just then she was too busy with the present to be much concerned with the past.

She went over to what had been the office and cleaned a small circle on the window with her wetted finger. Jay followed and he too made a peephole. There was nothing to see – nothing, that is, except rolls of dust on the floor, one split wellington boot, and a sackful of paper which someone had forgotten to put out for the dustman's final call.

'Brr! Horrid!' said Elspeth.

The office was empty and unpleasant, not empty and inviting like the yard. She turned her back on it and looked across to the open-fronted shed on the other side of the yard.

'Let's go over,' said Jay.

Bundled at the back of the shed were a few planks of wood and two trestles, two orange boxes, a broken wheelbarrow, a low bamboo table, and a number of other oddments. As Jay and Elspeth raked delightedly over these valuable 'extras' they said little, but each knew what was in the other's mind. They had played together for years, the oldest members of a group of six who lived near one another – Jay, Elspeth, Penny, Robert, Alice, and Simon.

Urgently Elspeth said, 'Could we play here, the six of us, do you think?'

'For Jay too the yard was already special.

Thoughtfully, smiling, he said, 'It would be a good place. That was even before they looked up and saw that at the river end of the shed, where the eaves finished, there was a floor.

'Look!' said Elspeth. 'I can't believe it. A sort of *loft*!'

'Yes!' He breathed the word rather than spoke it, almost as though something might disappear if he raised his voice.

'If only we could get up there!'

Jay's eyes were roving round the shed, and he found what he wanted.

'We could have a look if we pulled those trestles over and put a plank across them.'

'Oh yes, let's.'



They did that. Reaching up, they clung to the edge of the floor and pulled themselves up so that their eyes were just above their hands. They stayed like that as long as their arms would let them. It was difficult to see because what turned out to be a loose trap door blocked the light from the one small window which overlooked the river. The floor was in the shape of a square-cornered letter **U**. The trap door, which had been left unfixed, would exactly fill the gap in the **U**. When they lowered themselves to the plank, they were beaming.

‘A meeting place for our Club!’ said Jay. ‘We can have a

real club now that we've got a place to meet in. ROOFTOPS! Let's call it Rooftops!

'Good idea,' said Jay. 'Rooftops it is!'

There was no question now about whether they should play in the yard. Rooftops had settled it.

'We could furnish it,' said Elspeth.

'What with? How could we get furniture? And if we did, there wouldn't be room for us.'

'Oh, Jay,' said Elspeth impatiently, 'I don't mean we should furnish it with everything, full size. We'd have to put in it a few things that would look right in a place like Rooftops. We'd have to leave room for the six of us, of course, room to sit, I mean. The only place where you and I could stand up straight, anyhow, is in the middle where the roof is highest.'

By the end of the week, the rafters and sides and floor of Rooftops had been brushed free of dust and cobwebs. Its one window had been cleaned, and flowered curtains hung on either side of it. Alice, in her delight at finding something bigger than a doll's house to decorate, had at first looped them across the window, but Jay had objected.

'We don't want to advertise the fact that we've taken possession here. Somebody on the river might notice. Other people might decide that they would like Rooftops, and we've no actual right here, so . . .'

'Oh, what an awful thought!' said Alice, and she hurried to push the curtains well aside. 'I couldn't bear anyone else ever to have it. I can't imagine what we did without it.'

That was true for all of them, for Jay, for Elspeth and her younger brother, Simon, for Robert, for Penny and her

sister Alice. In one brief week after being 'found', the yard and Rooftops had been adopted. Apart from one lovely old horse chestnut tree in the far corner on the right, the yard was empty, but space was what they wanted. Games they could think of for themselves.

In the rafters of Rooftops, intended no doubt as a catch for the trap door which had never been fixed, was a ring, and to this ring Jay tied a rope.

'There now, come up,' he called.

But Simon was the only one who could at all easily climb the smooth rope. Proudly, but also enviously, Elspeth watched her athletic young brother as he shinned up.

'Oh, you are skinny!' she called. 'You're just like a monkey, "acrobating" about!' 12

Penny and Alice stood solidly on the ground and looked up. Then Penny spoke for them both.

'We simply can't. Even if we knotted it we'd be terribly slow. What can we do?'

Jay looked down at the two sisters. Penny's usually serene face was troubled. Its dimples had disappeared. Only the gleaming auburn curls were as jaunty as ever. Alice, younger and more solid, looked patiently up from beneath her thatch of straight ginger hair: somebody would solve the problem, she supposed. She knew she couldn't.

Jay said, 'It's difficult. Even if I knew where there was a ladder, we couldn't borrow it because we should have to say what it was for. The yard is special enough – we don't want too many people knowing about it, but Rooftops itself must remain a secret.'

Everybody agreed about that. Jay did not say so, but he

had a feeling that perhaps there was no one alive except themselves who knew about Rooftops.

After a minute or two Elspeth said, 'Of course the nicest thing would be a *rope* ladder. Couldn't we . . . well, couldn't we make one?'

'Oh yes,' cried Robert, with quite unusual excitement. 'We have yards of rope in our cellar and nobody wants it, I'm sure.'

'What luck! I hope it's strong enough. You'd better explain that it's for a rope ladder. After all, anybody might want to make one – it's such a nice thing to have.'

Robert, Jay's shadow and nearly three years younger, smiled because his offer had been accepted. It was a pale, quiet smile, but then Robert was that sort of person. His face was pale, his hair was more pale than fair, his eyes were an indefinite blue. In a large group he would not have been noticed at all.

Penny was not too sure about a rope ladder.

'Would the steps be made of rope too?' she said. 'They would be *saggy*.'

'They could be made of wood,' said Jay. 'What about cutting up an old broom handle?'

But nobody had one, and in any case they were going to need two.

Jay went off to a wood shop called Turner's, a welcoming sort of corner shop with a wide pavement on which were displayed planks and mouldings of various widths and lengths, boxes of clothes pegs, door and drawer knobs, banisters, plywood, hardboard. It was a busy shop, but never too busy for the shopman to have a word with the customer.

Besides, Mr. Turner knew this customer; he had sold him his first hammer and nails, but that was years ago. He looked at the tall boy, at the lean, gentle but determined face.

‘Well, Jay?’

‘Two long brush handles, please, Mr. Turner.’

‘What’s happened to the other two?’ he asked, as Jay paid.

‘Oh, these aren’t for brushes. I want to cut each handle into four to make steps for a rope ladder.’

Mr. Turner expressed no surprise that anyone should be making a rope ladder, but he stretched his hand over the counter and said, ‘Give those back to me. The wood’s too soft. You could have broken your legs. It might bear your weight and it might not, this wood. You ought to say why you want things when you’re going to use them in a way they weren’t meant for.’

He did not sound fierce, just concerned and interested. He reached behind him and triumphantly put on the counter two pieces of wood which looked very similar to the brush handles.

‘Birch dowelling,’ he said. ‘Now birch will stand up to being used as steps on your rope ladder. It costs a copper or two more, but it’s a lot stronger. You’ve got a drill, I suppose, or your father has?’

‘He has,’ said Jay. ‘But what for?’

‘Well, how are you going to lash the steps safely to the rope? Goodness me, I shall never dare let you loose on a desert island. You’ll have to drill a hole through each end of each step and put cord through it and then tie the step to the rope with that same cord. Other ways there may be, but that’s one.’

As Jay thanked him and turned to go, the man added, 'And don't drill the holes so near the end of the step that the wood splits.' •

'No, no, I won't,' said Jay, feeling that there was a lot to remember.

There was too, but at last the job was done and the moment came for fixing the ladder. Jay tied it to his back and climbed up the rope. Five eager pairs of eyes watched as he placed the loops at the top of the ladder over hooks which he had fixed in the beams of the roof. There was complete silence, anxious like the silence which precedes the launching of a ship. As Jay came down his feet swung forward and he was forced to tighten his handgrip.

'It isn't as easy as I thought,' he said.

It ought to have been a triumphant descent, but it wasn't. Climbing up seemed even harder.

'I've got it,' he said. 'We shall have to anchor it at the bottom so that it can't slide forward when it gets a person's weight on it.'

'Yes,' said Robert, 'and I know where there's an iron hook on a rubbish dump: it has a very long shaft, long enough to drive deep into the ground.'

Jay asked him to fetch the hook, and as soon as Robert left the yard he ran. For weeks the hook had lain there, but now that it was needed he convinced himself that someone must be hurrying from the opposite direction to seize it. It was a relief to find it there untouched.

While the boys had been busy making the ladder, the girls had not been idle. They had persuaded their mothers and their grown-up friends that now was the time to clean

out cupboards, and had hovered like happy birds of prey until some unwanted thing was cast out. This caused no surprise or curiosity: things were always being needed for plays, charades, dressing-up games. They collected an old tablecloth with a deep lace edge, four glass stands, an old hearth rug, a rich blue vase with stars spattered upon it.

'I shall take primroses from my garden to put in it,' said Simon.

Like a little troop of camels crossing the desert laden with treasure, so the six of them with bulging bags on their backs crossed the empty yard and brought their gifts to Rooftops. Everything was welcome, the picnic cups and plates, a little book rack, a small dresser (not dolls' size but not humans' either), an oval mirror, a miniature chest of drawers – its blue paint was chipped but its little knobs were of flowered porcelain.

Elsbeth had brought a low, narrow, immensely high-backed African chair. It had stood unused in the attic and was not wanted in her home.

'It's for anybody to sit in except at meetings, and then it's the secretary's chair,' she said.

'Look,' said Robert, 'there are four carvings of snakes on the seat, and the pattern in the middle is like a catherine wheel spinning. If you ask me, I think it's a witch doctor's chair.'

It looked quite majestic, towering behind the low bamboo table.

Then Robert produced his silver rose bowl.

'It's like a cricket prize for a whole team!' said Simon, and no words of praise could have been higher. 'Now, what's the

word? It's like a *trophy*! Were you really allowed to bring that?'

'Yes, were you?' said the others, examining the richly-engraved rose bowl, with handles in the shape of elephants' heads.

'It's come out of the cupboard under the stairs,' said Robert. 'My mother hates it. She had it given for a wedding present by a great aunt, and *she'd* had it stuck away in a cupboard for fifty years because she didn't like it either.'

'Well, *I* like it,' said Penny with feeling. 'It's time it was looked after.' She disappeared down the ladder, saying. 'I'm going to borrow Mummy's silver polish. I'm going to make those elephants shine.'

Then Simon said, 'Let's play 'He' now before Elspeth and I have to go. We were told not to be late.'

'Right,' said Jay. 'Block up the window, Penny.'

When the other five were down, Jay unhooked the ladder and dropped it for Robert to put in his haversack. He came down the rope and then threw the end so that it was lying across the floor of Rooftops, out of sight from the ground. Their special hooked stick would get it down again. All this was quickly done, and there was nothing then to reveal that the top of the shed was in use at all. The castle of their kingdom was safe from prying eyes.

And then, with earthquake effect, the little wicket door in the high double gates was burst open, and a man stood there shouting with rage.

'What do you think this is? A playground, eh? Come on, out of it! You've no business in this yard, and you know it. I'm sick and tired of you!'

Jay, by a little the eldest of the six children, felt that it was for him to speak. (Jay was short for Jameson. He hated his real name and never used it.)

Quietly he said, 'I'm sorry. We weren't doing any harm.'

Elsbeth followed up with, 'You see, we haven't anywhere else to play.'

'Now, look,' said the man, coming a step or two nearer, and looking even more unpleasant, 'I haven't come 'ere to listen to excuses. All I know is that just the other side o' those sheds I've got a warehouse chock full o' furniture, *other* folks' furniture that they've left in store. It's my job to keep it safe. You start playing wi' matches one o' these fine days, and before you know it, the lot will be up in flames – sheds, warehouse, furniture and all!'

Alice spoke up bravely: 'We're not hooligans, really we're not. We won't do anything that could harm your warehouse, I promise.'

'Pah!' sneered the man. 'Promise! Your promise 'ud last till I turned my back.' Raising his voice again and jerking his head, he went on, 'Well, what are you waiting for? Get out!'

It was a sad moment. Drearily the six children filed out defeated through the wicket door, their heads down, their eyes burning with hate. At Mrs. Pippin's shop the door was closed, the blinds were drawn. They could not even buy sweets.

The voice followed them.

'And if I catch you in this yard again I shan't be letting you off so lightly. I'll call the police. I'm warning you!'

Nobody answered. The wicket door banged shut. With



its closing, their plans for the Easter holidays toppled like a castle of cardboard bricks. It did not seem bearable that they would never play there again.

Elsbeth looked at her little brother and saw that he was nearly crying. He looked very small when he was sad. She put an arm round his shoulders.

'Cheer up, Simon. He was a horrid man, but don't be miserable.'

Simon *was* miserable though. He was not yet eight, and he was feeling happily important at the thought of actually being a member of the Club. It was only shortly before the discovery of the yard that talk about the Club had started.

In a forlorn voice he said, 'We shan't be having a Club now, shall we?'

'Why not?' said Jay, kicking a stone. 'He can't stop us having a Club even if he can turn us out of the yard.'

As the rest were saying, 'Of course he can't,' Penny put her hand to her mouth and gasped, 'We've left everything, every single thing except the rope ladder.'

Immediately everyone but Jay spun round as though to rush back. The warehouse man, who was about to enter his own premises, saw them pause and shook his fist at them. He waited for them to move on.

'Do you think, if we asked him, he'd let us get our things?' said Alice.

But Jay said, 'We're not asking. I hadn't forgotten about our things. I was hoping none of you would mention them before we had got out of his hearing. I feel sure he doesn't know that we've put anything up there at all.'

‘But what *about* all our things?’ said Elspeth. ‘We can’t leave them there for ever.’

‘He must go home sometime,’ said Jay. ‘We’ll get them back one evening. What a fuss, having to bring everything out again!’

They walked along the road by the river, past the corner shop where Mrs. Pippin sold sweets and newspapers, past the bakery and a factory and some offices. Then came the elegant houses which had not only back gardens and front gardens, but across the little road, riverside gardens as well.

‘I wish just one of us had a *big* garden,’ said Elspeth. ‘Ours weren’t big before they were sliced in half to make way for the New Road. They’re just useless now.’

‘No good for ball games at all,’ Simon complained. He had lost two good balls that week. They had sailed over the wall at the end of the garden and lost themselves in the endless stream of fast traffic that flowed along the New Road.’

‘No use at all,’ said Elspeth fiercely, ‘I never thought anybody could hate a road! It seems such a silly thing to hate, but really it’s spoilt everything.’

For many years that road had been planned, and now at last it had come. Perhaps the planners and the men who worked on it were pleased. Lorry drivers and some motorists liked this modern dual carriageway which saved crawling and winding through the High Street. What they saw was a great wide stretch of smooth straight road, and they zipped and roared along it and wished there were more roads in England like it. They never wondered – why should they? – how space had been made for such a road to pass through a crowded district, but the people who lived near by had

watched the destruction take place. They had seen factories and workshops and houses by the hundred torn apart and bulldozed flat, so that a road might be made where they had stood.

The boys had found some interest and excitement in watching strange, gigantic machines at work, but Elspeth had hated it all. Her great friend, Dinah, had been among those who had had to move to make way for the road, and Elspeth would not soon forget passing Dinah's house after the side wall had been ripped away. She had seen Dinah's room open to the rain and with a great hole in the ceiling. The pink wallpaper dotted with silver stars, was wet and stained. The mantelpiece, which had been spread with Dinah's treasured collection of tiny china animals and ornaments, stood bare and bleak. The bedroom door had gone and the door frame gaped emptily. Soon there would be nothing left.

Before very long, people in the town almost ceased to talk about the New Road. They shrugged their shoulders when there was still another accident, but for the most part the New Road did not affect them. The people who could not forget it were those who lived, as Elspeth and the others did, in that little 'pocket' of land which was left between the New Road and the river. There was no near bridge over the river, and no ferry, so every time they went anywhere they had to pass over the Road. In the words of the postman, 'You take your life in your hands every time you go across.' It was no wonder that the younger children were forbidden to cross it without an adult.

'Oh well, there wouldn't be much point,' said Jay. 'The

only recreation ground that was any use to us has been swallowed up by the Road. The park's too far away to bother with mostly, and whatever we played the park keeper would invent some reason for interfering.'

'After all, there are six of us,' said Elspeth. 'There's always something that six can do. Think what it would be like if there was only one poor lonely person in this little bit.'

Chapter Two

'We're like a lost tribe,' said Elspeth. 'We've nowhere to be.'

It was some days later, and they sat on the churchyard wall at the corner farthest from the church. They were having another meeting about their Club. So far it had no name, but they had got as far as writing the first three rules in their Club notebooks.

Penny said, 'That third rule about doing things and not being "sitters and watchers" ought to be followed by a rule about "not giving in".'

'You're thinking of the yard and Rooftops, aren't you, Penny?'

'Yes, I am, Jay,' said Penny firmly.

Simon and Robert, rather bored with the meeting, had left it and were skimming paper darts in the churchyard. Jay turned to call them back, but he was too late. The vicar was approaching from the church door. Robert and Simon saw him too as they had their darts raised once more to throw. As the vicar wagged his finger, the boys' arms dropped to their sides. They joined the other four who were now standing up and looking guilty too.

In a voice full of regret the vicar said, 'I'm sorry, children,



but you know that the churchyard is no place for your games, don't you?'

'Yes,' said Robert and Simon together.

'I don't like to turn you away from here, but you might, without meaning to, do considerable damage.'

'I'm sorry, sir,' said Jay. 'We weren't even thinking of playing here. It's an awful nuisance though. There doesn't seem to be anywhere where we can play on this side of the New Road.'

'I know, I know,' said the vicar in a bewildered way. 'The Road has brought its problems, I fear.'

Slowly the children wandered away, past the lovely houses, the offices, the factory, the bakery.

Alice suddenly smiled as she put her hand in her pocket. 'I've got fourpence,' she said. 'Let's buy some sweets. They'll cheer us up.'

In fact, Alice was nearly always cheerful; she was also fat. She said that sweets made her cheerful. Certain it is that they helped to make her fat.

Into Mrs. Pippin's shop they all trooped to spend Alice's fourpence. By the time they were all in, the shop was full.

Mrs. Pippin was plump and kind. Her cheeks shook a little, and she wore glasses that would not sit straight on her face. She looked at the children, one after another.

'Well,' she said, 'you don't look as if the school holidays had started.'

'We wish they hadn't,' said Alice.

'Dear me,' said Mrs. Pippin. 'What a state of affairs! In my young days we liked holidays.'

'Yes, but you see our plans have been spoilt,' Elspeth explained. 'Besides, in those times you could play anywhere because there wasn't much traffic, and you didn't have a New Road ruining everything.'

'That's true, Elspeth. That New Road's no blessing to us folk that live below it. It's been bad for me too.'

'Bad for you, Mrs. Pippin?' said Simon. He was very concerned. He had known Mrs. Pippin all his life. Nearly all his sweets, ice creams and iced lollies had come from her shop.

'Yes, bad for me, Simon. The hundreds of people who had to move away can't come and buy their papers and cigarettes and sweets from me any more, can they? I've lost a lot of customers, a lot of money every week, I can tell you.'

'Poor Mrs. Pippin,' said Elspeth, 'and here we are, grumbling just because we have nowhere to play.'

'That's all right, love. You can't bear my burdens, but – talking about playing – what about the yard there? I've seen you in and out of there a few times, haven't I – but not for the last few days, now I come to remember.'

'We've been turned out,' said several voices.

'Turned out?' said Mrs. Pippin, as though she hadn't heard aright. 'Who by, I'd like to know?'

'By the man who has a warehouse just past the sheds,' said Jay.

'That interfering old besom!' said Mrs. Pippin, her arms akimbo, a foot tapping with annoyance. 'It's nothing whatever to do with him if you play in that yard.'

What was Mrs. Pippin saying? The group was silenced for a minute. It was Jay who realised first what her remark might mean.

'Isn't it his yard?' he asked.

'That it isn't. It's Council property; has been for years, that old factory and its yard and its sheds. It's only fit for pulling down, you know. That's what the Council had in mind. They were going to pull it down and make riverside gardens along here, but that's years ago. Now, with the New Road cutting off this bit, I doubt very much if they'll ever bother.'

'So it belongs to the Council?' said Jay. 'Not to that man at all?'

Elspeth said, 'So he had no right to send us away?'

'Not if you weren't doing any damage. Now don't tell him I said so. I don't want to get mixed up in any

sort of row, but I don't like to see children "put down" either.'

'Suppose we went back and played there,' said Jay, thinking out aloud, 'and he came and told us to go, and we told him it wasn't his property, what do you think would happen then? We wouldn't tell him who told us, of course, you needn't worry, Mrs. Pippin. What do you think he would do?'

'Well, he wouldn't be put off, that's sure. He might take it into his head to report to the Council that their property next to his warehouse was being misused, *and* he'd exaggerate. They'd believe him though. So you wouldn't be any better off.'

'While you are all thinking,' said Alice, 'I'll buy my sweets, Mrs. Pippin, please. I'll have six ha'penny 'chews', chocolate ones, and that leaves a penny. Now what is there for a penny that will divide into six? . . . Oh yes, a liquorice telephone wire. That's a nice long thing to share out.'

By the time Alice had handed round her sweets, Jay was saying, 'Mrs. Pippin, I've had an idea.'

Elsbeth looked quickly at him and said eagerly, 'So have I. I wonder if yours is the same as mine. Is it about a letter?' Jay nodded.

'To the Council,' he said.

'How wonderful! It's nearly the same as mine. Mine was to the mayor. If he gave us permission to play in the yard, then nobody could stop us. May ordinary people write to the mayor, Mrs. Pippin?'

'Certainly. Your fathers pay rates and taxes enough to this borough, so why shouldn't you write to the mayor? He's

the head of the Council, but who elects the Council? Why, the ordinary people – you, when you're grown up.'

She looked at the six newly-hopeful faces and wished the yard belonged to her so that they might play in it to their hearts' content.

'Do you think we ought to address the letter to the Council or the mayor himself?' asked Jay.

Mrs. Pippin thought for a moment.

'I don't know anything about these things really, but if I were you I'd start with the one at the top of the ladder. If he can't do it, nobody can. Yes, send it to the mayor.'

'We will,' said Elspeth, and she was beaming.

Jay said, 'Thank you very much, Mrs. Pippin. We should never have known it all belongs to the Council but for you.'

They trooped out, lighter of heart, and Mrs. Pippin stepped into her back room to make out some paper bills. Thank goodness there were still a few children on her side of the New Road, she was thinking. They did brighten things up so. Where there were children there was always something going on.

That evening at dusk, Jay and Robert slid silently into the yard. Jay carried a small oil can, and he greased the latch of the wicket door until it moved easily. Then the boys went across to the shed, and after a minute or two Robert's torch shone slowly round Rooftops.

'Just as we left it,' he said.

Back at the wicket door, Jay let Robert through, bolted it again, and himself climbed up the high wall and dropped into the road.

'There now, *he* can keep out too,' he whispered.

The next day the Club met again. Jay had written in pencil a rough copy of the letter to the mayor.

'I'll read it out and then you can say what you think:

Dear Sir,

I understand that the empty factory in River Road belongs to the Council. Will you please allow six children to play in its yard and shed? They live below the New Road and urgently need somewhere to play.

Yours truly, . . . '

He looked around the group.

'It's fine,' said Alice and Robert together.

Elsbeth said, 'It sounds a bit stuffy.'

'It wasn't meant to be chatty. I kept it . . . well, rather formal.'

'Are you going to sign it – as you wrote it?' asked Penny. 'Or are we all going to sign?'

There was disagreement then. Some said Jay should sign it, and some said it should start 'We understand' . . . and be signed by everybody.

'I don't particularly want to sign it,' said Jay. 'I don't know what the fuss is about.'

Then Penny said, 'If only the Club had a name, we could put the Club's name at the bottom. It might sound more important. They might take more notice of us.'

'Oh yes.'

'Yes, they would.'

'What a good idea!'

So they talked and thought hard about a name for the Club. At least, five of them talked. Elsbeth was sitting

quietly, scribbling. After some time she looked up, and she was smiling.

'I've got it. Look!' she said.

Crowding round, they saw that she had written their names in order of age: *Jameson, Elspeth, Penny, Robert, Alice, Simon.*

'Don't put that beastly name,' said Jay. 'You know I hate it.'

'Sorry,' said Elspeth. 'This is important, so I used your proper name. Doesn't matter though. I'll cross it out, and make it Jay. The initial's the same.'

This done, she said, 'Now look, if you re-arrange the first letters J-E-P-R-A-S, they make a word. I've done lots of these in crosswords.'

They peered over her shoulder, saying, 'What word? What word?'

'JASPER,' she said proudly.

'Jasper,' they said after her, and then as if tasting it, 'Jasper Club.'

'Yes,' said Jay. 'Jasper is a boy's name, isn't it? Jasper Club could be somebody's name, but it doesn't matter really.'

'I don't think it does,' said Elspeth. 'Why should it?'

'Of course it doesn't,' said Penny. She rarely had doubts. Everything was so much easier for her than it was for Jay and Elspeth, who weighed things up carefully and pondered and wondered. Penny could make up her mind quickly. If she turned out to be wrong, well, other people made mistakes too.

'We shall never think of anything better than Jasper Club,' she said. 'It *was* clever of you, Elspeth.'

'I'll tell you why I like it,' said Elspeth. 'It's because Jasper Club sounds mysterious. It doesn't tell everybody what it is by its name, like Helping Hand Club, and Club of Six, and Friends' Club.' All these were names which had been suggested.

So Jasper Club it was to be. Eagerly they wrote the name in their notebooks, and on a clean page they put: '1st May. Chose the name, Jasper, for our Club, and wrote to the mayor.'

Elspeth said, 'You can be secretary, Jay. I'm sure you know more about such things than I do.'

'O.K. I don't know much though. I don't even know really how to start a letter to a mayor. First I put "Dear Mr. Mayor", but it didn't sound right. Then I remembered a play we had at school. One character was the mayor and people called him "Your Worship", but that was speaking, not writing. It looked silly, written down.'

'If I were a mayor,' said Alice, 'I wouldn't be called just "Dear Sir". It sounds so dull and ordinary.'

'It's safer though,' said Jay. 'Anything else might be wrong.'

'I wouldn't mind how wrong it was if it sounded grand enough.' Elspeth looked kindly at Alice's squat figure; her straight ginger hair was cut in a fringe, and when she was excited or worried she ran her fingers upwards through her fringe so that it stuck out like the edge of a thatch. Even so, she had dignity. She stood up now and draped imaginary robes around her. She drew herself to her full height, which wasn't very high, and with her nose in the air she said, 'If I wore velvet robes with wide fur all round the edges, and

a great chain thick with jewels round my neck, I should want to be called something very grand, to suit the robes.'

The others were grinning and giggling. Elspeth swept her a low bow and said, 'Will your Gracious and Honourable Worship deign to drink this cup of coffee?'

'A silver cup!' said Alice, and her lips were curved in disdain. 'That is the second best service. Bring me the gold.'

'Let's get on,' said Penny, jealous that her little sister could hold the floor. 'Let's say "Dear Lord Mayor". I'm sure that would please him.'

'No,' said Jay. 'We'll keep it dull and ordinary. It's just a business letter.'

Then, when Jay had brought out his clean sheet of writing paper and an envelope and a stamp which his mother had given him, Simon spoke. He had been quiet for a long time. He could run fast and climb high, but when it came to the sort of talk they had had that day, he felt very young. The few words he spoke startled everybody.

'Business letters are typed,' he said.

An unhappy silence spread instantly over the group. The letter was so nearly settled that they did not want any changes or anything to hold it up. All the same they couldn't help feeling, now that it had been pointed out, that Simon was right. Perhaps the mayor *would* pay more attention to a letter that had been typed.

They had been so pleased with their morning's work. The Club had been named and the important letter had been prepared, and now there was an obstacle – a big one.

Elspeth, her head between her hands, was saying, 'I've been wondering if we dare ask at the offices by the river.'

Perhaps someone would type the letter for us if we paid, but I don't know how much it would cost. I don't feel like barging into a strange office to find out either.'

Nor did anyone else.

For the second time that morning Simon surprised them. Without thinking what his remark might lead to, and taken unawares by the bomb-shell effect of his previous comment, he said, 'I know someone who types.'

'Heavens! Why didn't you say so before?'

'I've only just remembered.'

'Who is it, Simon?' said his sister.

'I'm not telling. I can't tell you.'

Three voices altogether said, 'Why not?' – 'Don't be so mean.' – 'That's not fair.'

But Alice planted her solid legs astride and said, 'He doesn't have to tell. It doesn't matter who it is as long as they'll type the letter.'

'You're right, Alice,' Jay agreed.

But Elspeth said, 'Simon, please, I wish you'd tell.'

Simon only said, 'I can't.'

He looked thoroughly miserable. They all thought he meant that he would not tell, but he meant exactly what he said, he did not know the name of the person he had seen typing by her window in one of the little side streets. He wished with all his heart he had not spoken. He could see now that the others were expecting him to get that letter typed somehow.

'It will be *doing something* for the Club,' said Robert. 'You wanted to be in it.'

As soon as Jay had written 'Jasper Club' under 'Yours

truly', he handed the letter to Simon saying, 'Try to get it done to-day. It's urgent. Don't lose it on the way, will you?'

Simon stood up with the letter in his hand. There were worried lines on his forehead and his lips quivered a little.

He had that small and helpless look which sometimes annoyed his sister and sometimes made her feel sorry for him.

'I would come with you, if you like, but how can I if it's so private?' she said.

Simon said, 'Alice can come.'

Alice was very surprised. She had thought he might want one of the oldest of the group. She was pleased though. She liked Simon, he always laughed so readily, and so loudly when she was being funny.

'We'll all meet in your garden after tea then, Simon,' said Jay.

The others watched Alice and Simon and wondered where they were going, but they did not follow.

'You never know with Simon,' said Elspeth. 'I don't know whether he does it so much now, but when he was little he was always talking to people he saw passing the house. He used to slip out after breakfast and sit on the front wall and say "Hullo" to people whether he knew them or not. Sometimes they'd stop and have a little talk with him. He knew the names of the dustman's children and how old they were and what they played at. He once asked the dustman, "What does Mrs. Dustman look like and why don't you ever bring her?"'

Penny and Jay and Robert laughed out loud.

'You're not to tell him I told you,' said Elspeth. 'It wouldn't be fair.'

‘We won’t,’ said Penny. ‘I say, do you think this person who types is someone none of the rest of the family knows, someone he said “Hullo” to?’

‘I just don’t know,’ said Elspeth. ‘It’s odd, having a little brother. Sometimes I think I know all about him, and sometimes I can’t understand him at all.’

Chapter Three

As Simon and Alice trudged along he said fiercely, 'I wasn't having Elspeth with me. She's always ticking me off about talking to people when I'm by myself.'

It sounded very odd to Alice and she didn't know what he meant, but she said 'Never mind' in a comforting sort of voice.

When they were out of sight of the others she said, 'Simon, which street are we going to?'

'The one after the next.'

'What's the number of the house?'

'I don't know . . . Oh, it's all right,' he said, as Alice looked at him in surprise. 'I know what the garden looks like. It has candytuft all along by the little wall. The lady didn't know the plants were candytuft. I did because I grew some in my garden.'

'Did she ask you what they were?' said Alice.

'Yes. She said she had only lived in that house for a few weeks and she was trying to get the garden into order, so I climbed over and helped her to pull up weeds.'

'Without being asked?' said Alice wonderingly, not fiercely as Elspeth would have asked it.

'It wasn't a party, silly,' said Simon. 'I just helped her.'

‘What did she talk about? Or don’t you remember?’

‘She said it was exciting having a new garden and not knowing what was going to come up in it. She said, “There’s a whole row of little plants there, and I’ve no idea what they are.” So I told her and now she always smiles at me when I see her typing by the window.’

As Alice listened she began to have a feeling that Simon didn’t really know this person. Poor Simon! No wonder he had looked so wretched.

Gently she said, ‘You don’t know her name. I thought you didn’t, but it doesn’t matter.’

‘It does, it does,’ burst out Simon, and a few angry tears trickled down his face. He dashed them away with a dirty hand, making grey smear marks on his cheeks. ‘I wish Jay had never written the silly letter. It won’t do any good.’

But Alice was very comforting. She gave him a somewhat grubby sweet and said, ‘Names don’t matter. The milkman’s been one of my friends all my life, but I don’t know his name . . . Besides, I’ve thought of something. Her name will probably be by the side of the doorbell.’

‘Oh yes,’ said Simon. ‘Yours is and ours is.’

He felt much better.

On they went until they came to a house with a small black iron gate. Simon raised his eyes to the window, and a look of alarm spread over his face. The lady wasn’t there at her desk.

‘She may be in the kitchen,’ Alice suggested. ‘Let’s ring the bell.’

They went up the path. There were three bells, each with a name beside it. If they had been one above the other, the

children would have known immediately which flat they belonged to, but these bells were tiresomely arranged. One was on the middle of the door, one was beside the door, and the other was on the side of the little porch.

Alice pointed to the one on the middle of the door: its name card was different from the rest – it was *typed*.

‘That’s it,’ she said, beaming. ‘I feel like a detective. Her name’s Winton.’

Simon nodded. He wasn’t beaming. ‘I like talking to people,’ he said, ‘but I don’t like asking them for things. I feel sick.’

Alice pressed the bell. ‘You only feel sick because you’re a bit frightened, silly. I’ll help you. If she doesn’t want to do it, she’ll just say she hasn’t time. Grown-ups are always saying it.’

They waited, and they rang again and waited, but nobody came. Now both children were worried because they did not know what to do. Alice’s fringe was standing almost straight out. It had never occurred to them that Miss Winton might not be in. They knew that it was not enough to go back to the others and say, ‘She wasn’t in.’ They would only be told to go and try again.

‘What shall we do?’ said Alice. ‘Just sit on the wall and wait for a bit!’

Simon was looking at the garden. ‘Some more weeds have grown. Shall we pull them up?’

Alice shrugged her shoulders. ‘I don’t know which are weeds and which are little plants. They all look the same to me.’

Simon was surprised. He was good at gardening. He had been weeding and planting for years.



‘You sit on the wall and I’ll weed then,’ he said. ‘You watch for her.’

‘How can I? I don’t know what she looks like. Is she very fat or very thin, or old or young, or what?’

‘She isn’t any of those,’ said Simon slowly. ‘She’s kind and she smiles a lot, and her hair is a bit grey . . . I can’t really remember . . . Oh yes, she has ear-rings that dangle.’

‘You can’t expect me to know her from those. She won’t wear the same ones every day.’

Simon hadn’t thought of that. While Alice sat on the wall,

he set about weeding the garden. Every time a lady passed along the road they looked up hopefully, but it was never the right person. After some time Alice lay face down on the flat-topped wall. She was tired of looking. Simon went on weeding and collecting the weeds in a pile on the footpath.

It was a large pile by the time a voice said, 'Well, well, this is a nice surprise.'

Simon swung round and Alice rolled off the wall and stood up. There, nearly at the gate, was the lady who typed – and she *was* wearing the ear-rings that dangled.

'How nice you've made my garden look!', she said. 'What a pile of weeds! I haven't had time to deal with them recently. What made you think of coming to do the weeding for me?'

Neither Alice nor Simon could find a word to say.

'Well, you've worked very hard. Come and wash your hands and then I'll find you a drink of squash if you'd like one.'

They went inside and had squash and biscuits while Miss Winton drank a cup of coffee. After that everything seemed much easier.

'Now tell me,' she said, 'did you come to do the weeding to give me a pleasant surprise, or did you come for something else?'

'For something else,' said Simon. 'Go on, Alice. You tell.'

So Alice, helped more and more by Simon as he felt braver, told Miss Winton about the New Road and having nowhere to play, about the yard and being turned out of it, and about Mrs. Pippin who said the yard did not belong to the man with the warehouse. Finally they reached the point when they told her about the letter to the mayor.

They were not very old, and it was a tricky story to tell. They had explained some things well and others not at all, though they were not aware of having left out anything important.

Miss Winton was interested but still not at all clear about why the children had come to see her. She was sure by now though that she came into all this somehow.

'Yes, it sounds a good idea to write to the mayor, but what is it you want me to do?'

'Please . . . Please . . .' said Alice and Simon together and each then stopped and waited for the other to go on.

'You needn't mind asking,' said Miss Winton. 'If it's something I don't want to do, I shall say so.'

'We wondered . . .' said Alice.

' . . . if you would type the letter, please,' went on Simon.

' . . . to make it look more important,' they finished together.

'Is that all?' said Miss Winton, and her smile was very kind. 'Why ever did you look so frightened?'

Well, they'd done it now, and both children sighed with relief.

'Let me see the letter,' said Miss Winton. '*Nineteen, Holly Walk, First of May . . . Dear Sir . . .*' She murmured her way through the letter, and then she said, 'Why yes, I'll type it for you. It will only take a minute or two. I quite agree that you ought to have somewhere to play. Who did you say wrote the letter?'

'Penny suggested one little bit, but Jay did most of it,' Simon said.

'Jay?'

'Yes,' said Alice. 'It's spelt J-A-Y. It's a sort of nickname made out of his first name. Everybody calls him Jay. You see he doesn't like his first name at all.'

'What a pity!' said Miss Winton. 'I wonder why.'

She thought that Jay was short for Jasper, but the children did not know that. They were puzzled by her next question.

She said, 'It's C-L-U-B, is it? Just one B?'

'Yes,' they said. Fancy a lady who typed not being sure that the word 'Club' had only one 'b'! Even they knew that.

But then Miss Winton was thinking of someone she knew whose name was C-L-U-B-B, only she didn't say so to the children. She just wanted to be sure that the spelling was right. She could not know that Jasper Club was the name of a Club, and Alice and Simon had not thought of mentioning it, and *they* did not know that *she* thought it was the name of a person. In that way the muddle began, but nobody saw that there was one.

'It's such a short letter - I'll do it while you wait.'

Miss Winton sat down at her desk and took the cover off her typewriter. In went a sheet of stiff, white paper, and Alice and Simon stood like guards on either side of the desk watching the keys go *click click* at enormous speed.

After 'Yours truly' Miss Winton stopped and said, 'Now Jay only has to sign it.'

But Alice said, 'Aren't you going to put "Jasper Club"? Jay wanted the letter to look just as he has written it.'

Miss Winton smiled and said, 'Even typed letters are usually signed by hand by the person who sends them, though the typed name often appears underneath too.'

'Jay didn't want to sign it himself,' said Alice.

‘Very well, I’ll type the name. . . . There’s a little space in case Jay decides to sign it too.’

‘Oh thank you,’ said Alice.

It was hard to believe that the letter was finished. It certainly looked important, and so did the typed envelope.

‘Thank you very much,’ said both children: and then Simon half remembered something Elspeth had said about having the letter typed in an office and paying for it.

‘Do people pay you when you type letters for them?’ he said.

‘I don’t usually type other people’s letters. In fact, it has never happened before. . . . If you are thinking you ought to pay me for typing, then I ought to pay you for gardening. So we’ll say it works out even, shall we? It would have taken me a long time to do the weeding.’

Full of gratitude, the children said goodbye.

When they presented the letter, Jay said, ‘Oh good! Doesn’t it look nice! Did your friend mind doing it, Simon?’

‘No, she didn’t, and she wants us to let her know what happens. Her name is Miss Winton.’

‘Well!’ said Elspeth. ‘So it isn’t a secret any more?’

‘No, but you’re not to ask me about her,’ said Simon, and he smiled at Alice.

Elspeth looked at the letter again. ‘I wonder if it should be signed by a *person* as well? I’m sure letters are – even if they come from an office.’

‘Miss Winton said so too.’

‘What do you think we ought to do then?’ said Jay.

'If we don't hurry,' said Elspeth, 'we shall miss the last post. Just put "Signed by Secretary" and then your own name.'

'Right,' said Jay. 'So it is "*Yours truly, Jasper Club*" and underneath, "*Signed by Secretary: J. Middleton*".'

It was done, sealed, stamped and handed to Simon.

'It's yours to post,' said Jay. 'You were clever enough to get it typed for us.'

Robert scowled very slightly. He wished he had been the one to get the letter typed. He would have liked Jay's word of praise.

Simon, accompanied by all the others, solemnly carried the letter to the pillar box and slipped it in. They heard it fall a long way down inside.

'To-day's Monday,' said Jay. 'If we're lucky and he writes straight back, we shall have a letter by Wednesday.'

There was no letter on Wednesday. Morning after morning Jay was first out of bed and waiting for the post. He wanted to be able to wave the letter before his father and say, 'There you are. The mayor says "Yes".' If the answer turned out to be a refusal, Jay decided that he would not mention it. His father had been so sure it would be no use. He had even laughed and said that the mayor had more important matters to attend to.

'That's just about what my father said. Grown ups are hopeless, most of them,' said Robert.

The parents of the others had not been very encouraging either. There was no point in trying to talk about the yard to them. They only cast a gloom, a bigger gloom than there was already.

‘Oh goodness,’ said Jay, ‘how long do you think it takes mayors to answer their letters?’

But nobody knew.

When the reply did come the following Wednesday it was not from the mayor, but from the town clerk. It began,

Dear Sir, [which pleased Jay because it sounded so grown up. What came next did not please him. . . .]

‘The mayor has passed to me your secretary’s letter of 1st May concerning the use of the yard of River Factory by six children. I regret to state that I feel sure the Council would not look with favour on such a suggestion. If permission were given for the use of Council property in one case, other requests for such favours would surely follow. The borough has an excellent recreation ground and a park at not too great a distance.

Moreover, the yard you mention, near the river as it is, would be a dangerous and unsuitable place for playing in. Also, no doubt, after a brief time people living nearby would complain of noise and disturbance.

I think you will agree that there are many reasons for not granting your request.

I remain,

Yours sincerely,

P. L. Boulter.

Town Clerk

As Jay finished reading aloud the letter, there was a burst of voices: ‘It isn’t fair. . . .’ ‘It is a suitable place. . . .’ ‘Nobody

would mind except the warehouse man, and he doesn't live there. . . . 'We're used to the river, we've always lived by it.'

'Pompous old parrot!' said Elspeth, and she grated her teeth. 'I loathe him.'

'What is he, this town clerk?' asked Penny.

'Oh, he's a sort of leader of the Council, I think,' said Elspeth.

'In that case,' said Penny sternly, 'he ought to know that "Esquire" only comes after a *man's* name. Look, he's put "Jasper Club, *Esq.*!"

But then, after their anger, they were miserable. Robert and Simon and Alice, at least, thought that that was the end, but Penny said, 'We're *not* going to give in. Let's go and tell Mrs. Pippin.'

This time it was Robert who had something to spend.

'Three pennyworth of aniseed balls, please, Mrs. Pippin,' he said.

'At eight a penny that will be twenty-four. . . . There now, Robert. Well, Jay, what's the matter?'

Jay screwed up his face and shrugged his shoulders.

'The mayor didn't even answer our letter himself. He just passed it on to somebody else. Look, here's the reply.'

Mrs. Pippin made an attempt at straightening her glasses, and six pairs of eyes watched her as she read slowly.

'Well, I don't think much of that for an answer,' she said scornfully, handing back the letter. ' "Dangerous and unsuitable," my foot! As for people complaining about noise, I'm one of the nearest to the yard, and you've never bothered me. It isn't as if there were a hundred children screaming and yelling. It's the feeblest excuse I've ever heard. Now that



warehouse chap doesn't count: *he* doesn't live in his warehouse or anywhere nearby. I'll have a word with my neighbours, and then if there's any more nonsense about noise, they'll back you up.'

Mrs. Pippin was pink with indignation. Perhaps all was not lost. The days of the Easter holiday were passing, though, and their hopes of being able to use the yard before the beginning of term became fainter.

They went next to see Miss Winton because, as Simon reminded them, she had asked to be told what happened. This time she was at her desk, and when she saw the group of children she went out and said, 'Well, any luck?'

'No,' said Simon, and the rest shook their heads.

'What a shame! I'm so sorry. Now, before we go any further, just tell me who's who.'

When they had introduced themselves, Jay handed her the letter. They watched her while she read it.

'Oh dear, not very sympathetic, is it?' she said. 'I rather thought you might be successful as the town clerk is interested in children.'

'Is he?' said Elspeth. 'You'd never think so.'

'Not from this letter, no,' Miss Winton agreed, 'but I've heard that he does a lot in his spare time for the Spastic Children's Hospital.'

'We collected a lot of money for spastics at our school last year,' said Jay. 'Someone came and spoke to us about them.'

'Our headmistress spoke to us herself,' said Elspeth. 'A new girl in our form has a sister who is a spastic. She's six now and she can hardly walk at all. Goodness, aren't we lucky, all of us!'

They nodded, and then Jay said, 'We'd better go now, Miss Winton. We just wanted to tell you what had happened.'

'Thank you. What I want to know is what you are going to do next.'

'What is there to do?' said Jay.

'Yes,' said Elspeth, 'what would you do?'

Miss Winton had no ready answer, but all the children were looking into her face. They were expecting a solution from her, or at the least a suggestion. -

She found herself saying, 'I have a lot to get through to-day, but I'll go on thinking about all this. Let's have another talk after tea, if you can come back then.'

Oh yes, they could. They would willingly have come back at dawn.

‘Don’t worry. Perhaps the town clerk will think again when he knows all the facts. We’ll ask him to have this matter dealt with at the next committee meeting.’ Fearing to raise hopes too high, she added, ‘I don’t know that we shall win, of course, but we’ll have a good try.’

So the six children went back down the little side street, feeling thankful for another ally.

By half-past five that afternoon they gathered again outside Miss Winton’s house.

‘Come in,’ she said, ‘and see what you think of this.’ She held up a typed letter. ‘There may be something you want to add or to alter. I’ll read it and you can then tell me whether it is the sort of thing you want to say. Now . . .

Dear Sir,

Thank you for your letter of 9th May I do not feel that you quite understand the position of the few children who live in this cut-off part of the town. Since they were deprived of a large part of their gardens to make way for the New Road, and since this same road swallowed up the local recreation ground, there is nowhere for them to play.

The park and recreation ground you mention are a long way off AND on the far side of the New Road, which, no one will deny, is an extremely dangerous road. The younger children are rightly not allowed to cross it without an adult.

The yard of River Factory would be an ideal place for them to play in. It is not in use for any purpose, and it is, I understand, due at some stage to be pulled down. They

are not asking to play close to valuable property, though in fact you need fear no damage.

The people who live nearby do not object to the noise that may be made, though, if it would help, the children would be prepared to use the yard only within certain hours. They are not asking for swings or seesaws or anything at all except the Council's permission to play in safety in a yard, that is lying empty. As for danger from the river, they have lived near it all their lives and understand the need for care.

I should be grateful if you would place this request before your committee at its next meeting,

Yours truly,

1

Miss Winton looked along the line of faces.

'Well, will it do?' she asked.

Of course it would do. They had been battling in vain themselves half the afternoon.

'I'll leave you to sign it then, Jay. Don't post it for a day or two until Mrs. Pippin has spoken to her neighbours, just in case someone is going to be awkward. By the way, while I was typing this, I found myself wondering – rather late – what your parents think. I suppose they agree that the yard is a good place to play in?'

'Oh yes,' said Penny, 'they agree but they're hopeless. They just said it was no good trying. . . .'

'That we should be wasting our time,' added Jay.

'That the mayor has more important matters to deal with,' said Robert.

'But your motto is, "Nothing venture, nothing win"?',

said Miss Winton. Then she saw that Alice and Simon had not understood. 'It means that if you don't try, you will never get anywhere.'

The letter was posted to the town clerk on 13th May. For the first reply they had waited nine days. The second took even longer.

As Robert said, 'Two letters have taken up nearly the whole of the Easter holidays.'

What none of the children knew was that the committee met only on the last Thursday in every month.

At last, on Monday, 29th May, a long letter plopped through Jay's letter box at 19 Holly Walk. He heard the rattle of the box and dashed downstairs and then straight up again to his room. A minute later, he was very near to tearing up the long-awaited letter. It was addressed as before to Jasper Club, Esq., and read:

Dear Sir,

At their meeting on 25th May the committee considered very carefully your request that the yard of River Factory should be used by certain children as a playground. I am sorry to have to inform you that the committee are, for various reasons, unable to grant your request.

For example: () If children are hurt while they are playing on Council land, their parents may declare that the Council is responsible for the accident and may claim money for damages. (2) Even property which is due to be pulled down can be damaged and lessened in value, and neither you nor anyone else can be certain that no damage

would be done. (3) The Council has other plans for the yard and buildings.

Yours truly,
P. L. Boulter
Town Clerk

On the way to school Jay met Robert and Simon, so they were given the dreary news at the beginning of the day. It was not until after school that they were able to tell the girls. They called at Penny and Alice's house, where they knew they would find Elspeth too that day.

'No good,' said Jay. 'We're no nearer. Listen to this.'

In a voice which had both scorn and despair in it, he read out the letter. It was greeted with groans and yells.

'Silly things!' said Robert. 'Except for the two small windows near the gate, the whole side of the factory is just wall and doors. There's nothing to damage.'

Penny said, 'Why on earth *should* we do any damage? Do they imagine *everybody* goes round knocking things about? When I think of Rooftops empty and without us, I feel sick.'

'I miss the tree very much too,' said Simon. 'I've never found such a good tree for climbing. All the trees in the park aren't worth that one in the corner of the yard.'

Alice sighed and said, 'I've never been up that tree. I've tried and tried to swing my legs up to that bottom bough, but I can't. . . . You know, I believe we could have used the rope ladder on it. Oh, I wish I'd thought of it before.'

'Do you think we shall ever play there again, Elspeth?' said Simon.

Elspeth could not say Yes, and she would not say No.

At that moment there was a knock at the door and the evening paper was pushed through the letter box. Alice ran to get it as she always did. Through the stained glass of the door she could see down the path a shadow that was not the paper boy's.

She opened the door and called, 'Mrs. Pippin! Hullo! Why are you delivering the papers yourself?'

Mrs. Pippin groaned and said, 'It's that paper boy! This is twice in a week he's gone off and left a pile, and people get so cross if their papers don't come at the usual time. As if I didn't have enough work in the shop, without having to take papers round too!'

By this time Mrs. Morgan, Penny and Alice's mother, and the other five children, were in the hall too.

Jay stepped forward.

'I'll take them round for you, Mrs. Pippin,' he said. 'I should like it. Just tell me where they go. Come on, Robert, you take half.'

'Well, that is good of you. This armful is for your road, and those in the bag are for the two side roads past the pillar box. They're all marked on the top.'

As Jay went off, accompanied by Robert and Simon, Mrs. Morgan asked Mrs. Pippin to come in and have a cup of tea.

'I believe I will,' said Mrs. Pippin, chuckling like a school girl who was being naughty. 'My sister's looking after the shop for half an hour, and I must say it's nice to be out of it for a bit.' She looked round at the four remaining children: 'Well, what's the news? What's the latest in the serial of the yard?'

While she drank one cup of tea straight off and then sipped another, they told her.

When they had finished she said thoughtfully, 'Other plans for the yard and buildings, have they? I wonder. I'd be more convinced if they said what they were. Plans they may have, but they take such a time putting their plans into action, you might all be grown up and not needing the yard before they start.'

The children hadn't thought of that. If Mrs. Morgan had, she hadn't said anything.

Elsbeth said slowly, 'So, if we agree to pay for any damage, and if our parents promised not to worry the Council if we got hurt, and *if* we said we only wanted to use the yard until they were really ready to start work on it, THEN do you think they'd let us have it?'

'Yes, do you?' said Penny, and then there was silence, and they all gazed at Mrs. Pippin as though she were a fortune teller.

At last she said, 'They might. You've got this far. Nothing will happen if you don't keep on. Some good may come of it if you do. Don't you agree, Mrs. Morgan?'

In a helpless sort of way Mrs. Morgan said, 'I . . . don't . . . know, Mrs. Pippin.'

'Well, I do, and if they were my children I wouldn't let them be trampled on and just stand and watch. Mind you, I know the Council's not obliged to let them play in that yard, but in my opinion they might be more ready to agree if you parents showed a bit of interest. That's straight talking. Perhaps I shouldn't have said all I have, but I'm nothing if not downright.'

‘Oh, that’s all right, Mrs. Pippin. It’s just that I’m not a very determined sort of person. You’re right, of course. We ought to have ~~tried~~ to help them . . . I’ll tell you what I will do, I’ll get the parents together, and we’ll talk it over.’

‘Good,’ said Mrs. Pippin with great satisfaction. ‘Keep in mind that Miss Winton is willing to do anything she can. She said so in the shop this afternoon. If I were you I’d ask her along too.’

The four children looked lovingly at Mrs. Pippin. They knew that they alone would not have been able to get Mrs. Morgan to the point of doing anything.

Chapter Four

Miss Winton arrived last at the meeting which was held at the Morgans' house. As she was being introduced to the parents and came to Jay's father, she said with a smile, 'No one need tell me who you are. Jay is so very like you.'

Mr. Middleton beamed. He enjoyed being told how like him his handsome son was. He thanked Miss Winton most graciously for trying to help the children.

'Not at all,' she said. 'I felt that they deserved help, Mr. Club.'

'Middleton,' said Jay's father. 'My name is Middleton.'

'Oh, I beg your pardon.'

'You're looking puzzled,' said Jay's father, 'but it must be confusing to meet us all at once.'

'Oh no, not really. I shall get it straight in a minute. You are Jay's father, Jasper Club's father, that's right, isn't it?'

'It is and it isn't. I'm Jay's father. I don't know who Jasper Club is.'

Miss Winton looked round the group. One or two heads shook and hands waved helplessly, but nobody spoke.

She smiled shyly and said, 'The letters Jay showed me from the Council were addressed to Jasper Club, Esq., and the rough copy of the first letter had "Jasper Club" at the end of it - that's all.'

'Jasper Club?' they chorused.

'Jasper Club, 19 Holly Walk.'

'That's my address,' said Mr. Middleton, 'but I've never heard of the Jasper gentleman.'

'I thought . . .' said Miss Winton, 'that it was your son, Jay - Jasper?'

'Jameson,' said Mr. Middleton. 'That's his proper name, but for some reason or other his mother came to dislike the name, and the boy didn't like it either, so he's always called "Jay".'

'Never "Jasper"?'

'No.'

'Then who is Jasper Club? Why should he be using a name that isn't his?'

Nobody had the slightest idea.

'There's something here that we don't understand,' said Mr. Morgan, 'and we can't go on until we do. I'll call Penny down. She won't be asleep yet.'

She wasn't. She was too excited at the thought of the meeting that was going on down below. Alice came down too, sleepy-eyed but determined not to miss anything.

'Now,' said Mr. Morgan, 'if you expect us to help you, there is something we have to get clear. . . . *Who* is Jasper Club?'

Penny and Alice stood side by side in their nightdresses, looking rather pathetic. They could feel that something was wrong, but what could it be? The fact that they had a Club wasn't a secret really: it just hadn't been mentioned to their parents. There was no reason why it should have been.

'Come along now,' said Mr. Morgan. 'Who is Jasper Club?'

'It isn't "who",' said Penny. 'It isn't a person.'

'It's all of us,' said Alice. 'You don't understand.'

'We should like to,' said Miss Winton gently. 'I thought Jasper Club was Jay, but it seems that it wasn't.'

'Oh no! He's the secretary of it,' said Alice, thinking how stupid they all were.

'Ah!' said Miss Winton, the light dawning. 'The secretary of a Club? That would explain the single "b" in Club. It's a Club that you children formed among you?'

Two heads nodded guiltily.

Mr. Morgan said, 'Well, there's no harm in forming a Club, but why did you let the Council think it was a person, and how did you come to call it "Jasper"?'

On the verge of tears, Penny said rapidly, 'J for Jay, A for Alice, S for Simon, P for Penny, E for Elspeth, R for Robert: J-A-S-P-E-R. It took such a lot of working out, and now you all know and it's spoilt.'

'I'm sorry, Penny,' said her father. 'We didn't mean to pry, but it wasn't a good thing to let the Council think it was a person.'

'We *didn't* let them. We didn't even mean them to think it. We thought a letter from a Club would sound more important than a letter from a person, and we tried to make it sound businesslike.' Fiercely she added, 'If the Council thought J. Middleton was secretary to a man called Jasper Club, it wasn't our fault. I never even knew they thought it until just now.'

Miss Winton started to chuckle and Mr. Middleton laughed out loud, and then the rest, realising how the mistake had arisen, joined in. Everybody was laughing except the children.

Mr. Morgan, feeling that he had been fierce without good cause, said, 'All right, you two. Take an apple each and off to bed with you. We'll do our best for your Jasper Club.'

Penny and Alice went without a word. Really, grown ups were exceedingly odd.

Downstairs the grown ups were now very cheerful. They chatted late into the night, drank a great quantity of coffee, and composed one letter.

In that letter the fathers agreed to pay the Council for any damage done to the property, and if the children came to harm the Council would be held in no way responsible. Moreover, they made clear, the children were only asking for the use of the yard until it was required for other purposes.

The letter was typed by Miss Winton and signed by all the fathers, headed by Mr. Middleton.

Then time went by when nothing appeared to be happening.

'How much longer have we got to wait?' Jay grumbled.

'Never mind,' said Elspeth. 'If we win, it will have been worth it. At least we ought to know for certain before the summer holidays start.'

When the next piece of news did come it was from Mrs. Pippin.

'Yesterday, when I was outside, pulling down my sun blind, a big shiny black car stopped just at the gates of the yard. I fiddled about with the hook on the blind just so that I could wait and see who got out.'

'Who did, who did?' cried Alice and Simon together.

'Four gentlemen! And *one* of them,' she paused triumphantly, 'was the mayor!'

'In his robes?' asked Elspeth. 'With his chain of office round his neck?'

'Now, you do expect a lot, don't you? You're as bad as my little nephew. When I took him to the High Road to see the Queen go by on her way to the airport, he just burst into tears because she wasn't wearing her crown and a lot of jewels. No, of course the mayor wasn't wearing his fur-trimmed velvet. It wouldn't have been suitable. He had an ordinary smart suit, dark grey, I believe.'

'Please go on,' Jay pleaded. 'Don't bother about his clothes.'

'Well, there he was - I knew him because I've seen his picture in the papers.'

'And did they go inside?' said Elspeth. 'Did they go into the yard?'

'They did,' said Mrs. Pippin, 'when they could get in, but they had to borrow the window cleaner's ladder first. One of them had to climb over and undo the wicker door. I chuckled to myself.'

Ignoring all that, Jay said anxiously, 'What were they doing? Did they stay in the yard or did they go into the sheds too?'

'Now, now, how should I know that?' said Mrs. Pippin. 'I couldn't go peeping, could I, much as I'd have liked to.'

'If they do let us have the yard,' said Jay, 'I hope they won't move anything. We like it as it is, trestles and planks and old piping and everything.'

'Yes,' said Robert. 'Two of the pipes are big enough to hide in.'



‘And there’s that broken wheelbarrow,’ said Simon. ‘I found an old wheel yesterday that might fit.’

‘Well, you’ll just have to wait and see,’ said Mrs. Pippin. ‘It’s no good worrying. At least something’s happening.’

What did happen next came as a surprise. A few days before the end of June another letter came from the town clerk. This is what it said:

Dear Sir,

As you have been associated from the beginning with this matter of the yard at River Factory being used as a playground, it has been decided to ask you to attend part of the Council Meeting which will be held at the Town Hall on Thursday, 29th June. You would then be available to answer without further delay any questions that may arise.

We should be grateful if you would attend at 7.30 p.m. in Room 27.

For a moment the Jaspers were shocked into silence.

Then Robert, his eyes wide with dismay, said, 'They want *us* to go to the meeting? Is that what it means?'

He knew well enough what the letter must mean, but he did not want to believe what he had read.

Elsbeth nodded.

'Not *us*?' said Alice and Simon together, and Simon added, 'Half-past seven is too late. We shall be getting ready for bed.'

Nobody took any notice of that remark.

Jay said, 'I've never been to a proper meeting. And they'll still be thinking Jasper Club is a man. If I say who I am, it won't help because they are probably thinking J. Middleton is a man too. Why ever didn't we think of all this? If we tell them *now* that we are not who they thought we were they will have nothing more to do with us.'

'We couldn't have known what was going to happen,' said Elsbeth.

'That isn't much comfort. You don't have to go and face

the Council. As there isn't a person called Jasper Club, I shall have to go. I signed the letter and I'm the eldest.'

Elsbeth said, 'I'll come with you.'

But Penny wasn't having that: 'We'll all go. The invitation is for Jasper Club, and that means all of us whether they know it or not. One person isn't the Club, and two people aren't. It's everybody.'

Jay smiled and nodded.

'Good. Then we'll all go,' he said. 'My father thinks we shall do better at this stage if we see it through ourselves.'

When the great day came, at ten minutes before half-past seven in the evening, six incredibly neat children stood outside the Town Hall at the foot of the wide steps. They felt even smaller and younger than they were.

'Come on,' said Jay. 'We'd better go in.'

Outside, it was a warm summer evening, but inside the huge swing doors the air was almost chill. The floor of the hall was tiled and cold columns of marble rose to the gilded ceiling. Portraits, painted in oils, looked down on the little group. A central staircase of polished oak led up to a rather grand gallery.

Jay and Elspeth looked at each other. 'Their mouths were dry with fright. Where was Room 27? There was no one to ask, and throughout the building there was silence. It was five minutes to half past.

Then, from one of the corridors, came a jingle of keys and there emerged an old man in uniform.

'Now then,' he said at once, 'this is no place for a bunch of children.'

'No,' said Jay feelingly, 'it isn't, but the town clerk asked us to come.' He waved the envelope he held in his hand. 'The letter said Room 27.'

'Number 27!' said the astonished old man. 'That's where there's a committee meeting. You must have got it wrong. You'll not be going to the meeting.'

'Only to part of it,' said Elspeth. 'Please tell us quickly where it is, or we shall be late and it will be no good.'

She looked so earnest that the old caretaker said doubtfully, 'Well, I suppose it's in order if you have a letter. . . . I'm not generally on duty in the evenings. Come along; we'll see what we can do.'

As they went up the stairs with him he asked, 'What name shall I say?'

'Oh, well . . . it's rather difficult . . .' began Jay. 'You'd better say . . .'

'Come on, come on. I thought you were in a hurry.' He took the envelope out of Jay's hand and read out, 'Jasper Club . . . Hm, bit high and mighty sounding in its first half, but not *difficult*! You should see some of the names we get.'

They turned left at the top of the stairs. When they had nearly reached the room at the end of the corridor, the old man signalled to them to stop.

'I'll just let them know you are here.'

Outside Room 27 he stopped and knocked, and a voice said, 'Come in.' The old man put his head round the door. They heard him say, 'You expecting a young party, sir? Name of Jasper Club.'

The voice, which belonged to the town clerk, said, 'Show him in, please.'

'Him'. Elspeth's knees quaked.

The old man held the door wide, and the little line, led by Jay and ending with Simon, trooped in. The door closed behind them. The faces of eleven important gentlemen showed surprise, curiosity, dismay, irritation, in their different ways. Alice alone saw how exceedingly funny they were.

Sternly the town clerk said, 'What is the meaning of this?'

'We've come about the yard, sir,' said Jay.

'*You* have? You are the children concerned, I can only presume? We were expecting Mr. Club.'

'Jasper Club,' said Jay, trying to save confusion.

'Well?'

'We all belong to it, sir. You see, Jasper Club isn't a man. We never said it was. We never meant you to think it was.'

'No, never,' said Robert, anxious as ever to support Jay.

The town clerk had for years met and countered trickery and desire for personal gain, and he saw deceit now where it did not really exist. He put his hands against the table and pressed back in his chair.

'I thought I was past being surprised, but I confess I am taken aback. I... I... well, I find it very hard to believe you.'

Jay did not know what to say. There was a growing annoyance in the group of busy men who sat around the great polished table. Elspeth could feel it and she was afraid: if the mood of the meeting did not change the yard would be lost to them for ever. She must try something. Unclenching her hands, she stepped forward and made a half curtsy.

'Please, this isn't a trick. Please let me explain. I'll be very quick.'

And explain she did, until half smiles began to appear on the faces of one or two of the councillors. This was a *most* unusual committee meeting.

Elsbeth, feeling more confident now, reached the part about the typing: 'It was Simon's idea that the letter should be typed.'

'And who is Simon?'

As though he were at school, Simon put up his hand. One foot found its way nervously to rest on the other, but he did not speak.

The town clerk, who hated above all things to be made a fool of, poked his head in Simon's direction. 'So it was your idea to get the letter typed, eh?'

Simon nodded.

'Then I think you are very much to blame for what has happened. I am shocked . . . yes, shocked that a boy of your age could ever help to think out a plot like this.'

Simon did not know how to answer. He could feel the gaze of a large number of people upon him. His eyes filled with hot tears.

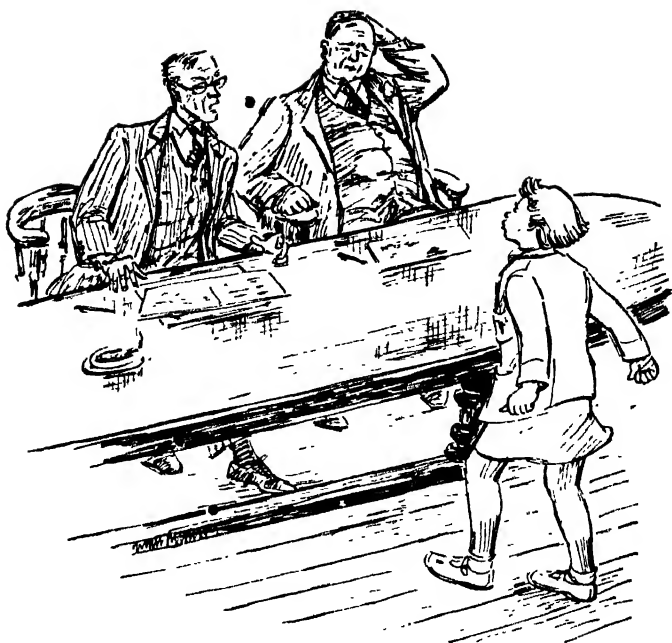
Alice, roused to fury, stumped right up to the town clerk before anyone could stop her. Her fringe stuck out threateningly.

'It never was a plot,' she said, 'so stop bullying Simon.'

Penny, in support of her sister and forgetting for a second what was at stake, added, 'Yes, you shouldn't think wicked things about people you don't know.'

Jay and Elsbeth looked at each other with horror. Everything was going to be lost.

The fat councillor, who sat next to the town clerk, patted



gently at the bald patch on the top of his head. He had grandchildren of his own, and he was beginning to feel sorry for this little band.

‘There is still something we don’t quite understand,’ he said. ‘It may have a simple explanation. Now, if the first letter had been written instead of typed, we should have known by the handwriting that it had come from a child. Now, tell me this, by having the letter typed, were you trying to hide the fact that you were children?’ He looked at Jay.

Jay shook his head and said, ‘It wasn’t like that at all.’ Simon found his tongue at last. He could answer this.

He knew exactly why he had suggested that the letter should be typed. Again he put up his hand.

‘Yes, Simon?’

‘When my daddy gets important letters they are typed ones. I’ve always noticed. Our first letter about the yard was very important – that’s why it was right for it to be typed.’

‘Thank you, Simon,’ said the fat councillor. ‘I think that clears up everything.’

Even the town clerk relaxed a little, and expressed relief that the explanation was so simple. After he had heard that the second letter had been prepared as well as typed by a kindly adult, who had known nothing of the Club, he nodded several times.

‘Then we need not change our minds,’ he said. ‘After the letter from your fathers we had almost decided to allow you to use the yard during daylight hours, but not after eight o’clock in the evening . . .’

‘Oh, thank you, sir,’ said Jay.

‘Wait, wait. I think we must make it clear before we go further that, if we give this permission, we are giving it to a limited number of children. Now and again, other friends may want to join you, and we do not object to that, but there must never be more than ten of you in the yard at one time. If we ask you to make us a promise to that effect, can we be sure that the promise will be kept?’

‘Yes,’ cried six eager voices.

‘Very well,’ said the town clerk. ‘Now just wait outside for a minute and we will then call you in again.’

For several minutes they waited, whispering, though they need not have whispered, for the door was very thick. After

a while Simon tiptoed along the corridor and leaned over the banisters. Jay signalled to him to come back at once. It was as well he did, for just then the door opened, and they were called back into Room 27.

Now the children entered with more confidence. They no longer felt frightened little strangers.

The town clerk said, now with half a smile, 'On behalf of this committee, I shall be sending one more letter to the members of Jasper Club. In that letter I shall give written permission for you to play in the yard of River Factory. You may have the use of it, provided you behave yourselves, until we are actually ready to work on it, perhaps in a year or eighteen months.'

'Oh, thank you, thank you.'

The fat man, with a wink, said, 'Perhaps you'll invite us to one of your meetings some time: you've been to one of ours.'

Jay's answer came jauntily.

'Four of you, sir. We have to keep our numbers down.'

As they closed the door behind them the children could hear the committee still laughing.

'Let's go and see Miss Winton and tell her,' said Elspeth.

As they all moved towards the top of the staircase, Penny said, 'Rooftops tomorrow.'

As though they were drinking a toast, the rest whispered, 'Rooftops to-morrow.'

Chapter Five

By arrangement the Jaspers breakfasted early the next morning. It was a school day, but there was no question of their waiting until late afternoon to pay a visit to Rooftops. By twenty to eight they met outside Mrs. Pippin's shop. Busy as she was with the last batch of morning papers, she paused to congratulate them heartily. Five minutes later they were stepping through the wicket door.

As Elspeth closed it behind them she said quietly, 'Ours, all ours!'

They might have gone in one headlong rush to the far left corner where Rooftops awaited them, but they stood still, rather close together near the gates, looking at what they had won the right to use. It was a perfect morning, sunny, still. The cobbles round the edge of the yard were cool as yet to the touch.

'Chestnut candles!' cried Elspeth and Penny together, their gaze captured by the beauty of the horse chestnut which stood in the far right corner by the river wall.

'Hundreds of candles!' said Jay.

'Thousands!' said Simon.

Still staring, Elspeth said, 'Oh, they're better than a Christmas tree – in the summer! Don't you . . .'

With a little cry of joy Simon interrupted her.

'Look – look!' he begged, pointing below the office windows. 'It's thrift – growing between the cobbles!'

'Fancy finding flowers too!' said Alice.

All the children crouched to examine the two small cushions of thrift. One had two flowers and a bud, the other five flowers, bright pink, almost papery.

'We haven't much time,' said Jay.

Penny almost wailed, 'Oh, why isn't it half-term or something? I feel too busy to go to school.'

But it wasn't half-term – or anything. In a body they crossed the yard to the shed. Jay hooked down the rope and climbed up. His thin face beamed almost broad with happiness as he smiled down at the others.

'Everything's just the same,' he said, nodding, his thick, dark hair falling over his forehead.

He sounded pleased, and yet he would have been shocked to find that anything had been touched. He was so sure – as were they all – that nobody at all knew of Rooftops except the men who built it, and that was too long ago to matter.

When all six Jaspers were up aloft, Rooftops was very full.

Indignantly Penny said, 'It isn't just the same, Jay. Look at Robert's rose bowl. It's gone black. It will have to be polished again.'

Alice protested, 'And a spider's gone and spun its web right across the window. What cheek!'

'I don't mind about the spider,' said Jay. 'I knew really that our things were safe, but sometimes in bed at night I've worried a bit and wondered.'

‘So have I, often,’ said Elspeth. ‘I’ve wanted my high-backed chair, but I felt if I fetched it away I should be somehow breaking faith, and the way would have been open then for someone else to get in.’

The sight of a passing tug drew them to the little window which looked straight down on the full, sparkling river, broad, majestic: their river, which made their joy two-fold and moreover no doubt knew their secret. For all of them, variously, it was a moment to be remembered.

Elspeth said, ‘Nobody must know about Rooftops—ever.’

‘Heavens!’ said Jay, breaking the spell as he looked at his watch. ‘If we don’t run, we shall be late.’

As Robert waited for his turn to go down, he said, with more expression of feeling than he usually betrayed, ‘In three weeks and two days it will be the end of term, and then we shall never have to hurry away.’

It was difficult that day to wait until school was over, but at least it was a Friday. After school they ran home, changed into old clothes, gathered up some food, and made all speed back to the yard.

They picnicked beneath the candle-decked horse chestnut tree. It had been a loved tree once for certain. Earth had been heaped about its roots, and a little wall built about the earth, so that the tree stood like a sole performer upon a tiny stage. Around its twisted trunk several slats of a circular wooden seat still remained. The tree, though older than the derelict factory, was in the prime of life.

Elspeth leaned over the river wall and looked sideways at it, saying, ‘It’s lovely, the way the boughs sweep out over the wall and then down and then curve up again.’

Longingly Simon said, 'I wish we could fix a swing on the bottom bough, and swing and swing over the river.'

As with a thunderclap the atmosphere changed.

Fiercely Jay turned on him, 'Don't be a *fool*! It would be dangerous and not clever. Suppose the bough broke or the rope wore through! Look at the depth of this wall! At low tide you'd have your bones broken, even if you were alive. With a tide running you'd be swept away.'

'Lord, yes!' said Elspeth with disgust. 'You can't play tricks with this sort of river. You'll be turned out of the Club if you do things like that.'

Simon, slightly overcome by the double attack, still managed to say in a quiet, surly voice, 'Mayn't I even climb the tree?'

'Of course you may,' said his sister. 'I'm not a spoilsport, but you're not to go far out on the boughs that hang over the river. For goodness' sake be sensible! I don't want to be blamed because you do mad things, and I should be, I know I should. It's awful being the older one!'

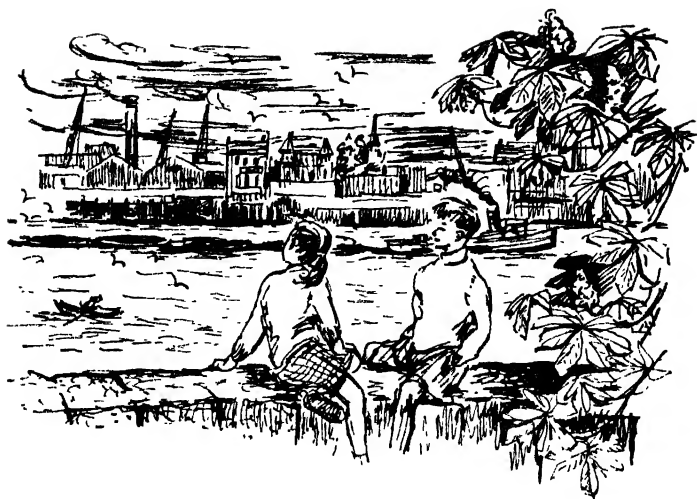
'I was only *thinking* a wish!' protested Simon.

'Well don't, at least not that kind. If you think wishes hard enough you'll find yourself doing the things – remember Toad and that motor car he stole when he came out of prison!'

'Remember Toad yourself! I'm not like him, not in the least.'

'Well, don't start trouble!'

'I wasn't, so there. Bother you! I'm going to play marbles in the middle of the yard *if* you don't mind. Come on, Robert.'



Robert obliged. Penny went off with a tin of silver polish in the direction of Rooftops. Alice, determined to root out the offending spider and set all to rights, followed her sister.

Jay and Elspeth moved to sit on the broad wall. A tug churned upstream, a double string of lighters behind it, laden with coal. Downstream a single canoe sliced through the water, and then, when the wash caught it, bobbed like a cockleshell. Black-headed gulls hung in the air and then slid sideways and down, screaming.

Watching them, Jay said, 'I've been thinking, not thinking a wish like Simon, but that we ought to do something. As a Club, I mean. I know we started off just wanting somewhere to play, but that feels a long time ago, and now we've got it . . .'

'Yes, we've got such a lot, a secret meeting place and a shed and the yard: we've got to *use it all*.'

‘Yes, but besides playing, what shall we do?’

‘That’s just it,’ said Elspeth. ‘What? You know, it is strange, somehow I thought when we’d got our wish about this yard, I’d never want anything again, but one thing grows out of another. What I want as soon as the shops open to-morrow is one of those cheap badminton racquets that are only five shillings, and the shuttles are ninepence. Would you feel like buying one too?’

‘Yes, I would. I’ve still got five shillings of my Christmas money. This yard is so right for such a game it would be a waste not to have racquets.’

Elspeth laughed.

‘That’s what I mean,’ she said, ‘about one thing growing out of another. My mother says the more people have the more they want, and you can see how it happens too. I’ve seen those cheap racquets for ages, but it’s having the yard to use it in that has made me want to buy one. The next thing will be a net, I suppose, but for now we’ll make do with string. I haven’t any more money.’

The days passed. A version of badminton was played often and with much zest if with little skill. New games were invented, enjoyed and forgotten while old games took their place. Plays, mostly their own, unwritten plays, were acted in the shed. Rooftops was useful in a way they had not at first thought of. It was a thing undreamed to have an ‘entrance’ from above, an entrance by rope or rope ladder. Rooftops was by turns that summer an actual rooftop with a ‘burglar’ crawling upon it, a balcony, the top of a ship’s

mast, a mere upstairs, even Mars once – with the voice of a Space-man issuing from it. Oh, it was rich for invention. There was no end.

From time to time though, every few days, the question would arise again, ‘What shall we do as a Club that makes it worth while being a Club?’

There had been several suggestions, none of which for one reason or another gained the interest of all six Jaspers. The most recent had been made by Robert.

‘I saw an advertisement for the church bazaar to-day,’ he said. ‘They need five hundred pounds.’

‘What for?’ Jay asked.

‘Towards a stained glass window and to repair the tower.’

Nobody said anything for a moment, and then Jay looked at Robert and said, ‘Were you meaning that we should try to earn some money for the bazaar?’

Robert shrugged his shoulders.

‘I don’t know really. I just wondered.’

‘No,’ said Penny, who could always be relied upon to have a definite opinion.

Elsbeth said, ‘I wouldn’t mind helping at a stall on the day, but I don’t want to work for it for weeks and weeks. Why don’t you, Penny?’

‘Well, lots of people will be doing things for it. *Whatever* we did we could only do a little bit towards it. I want something just the Club can do.’

Everybody agreed with that.

‘Besides,’ Penny went on earnestly, ‘stained glass windows and towers are – well, they’re all right, but they’re not alive, they’re *things*! Oh, I wish I could explain.’

That Simon perfectly understood was shown by his suggestion.

'We could look after sick animals,' he said.

He had once looked after a hurt blackbird and mercifully it had got better in a few days and flown away.

'Oh, that's no good,' said his sister. 'There are special places for looking after sick animals and people who've learnt how to do it. We don't really know anything about it. It would be sheer luck if they got better. Besides, in term-time we're at school all day.'

'So things are "out" and sick animals are "out",' said Jay. 'What does that leave?'

'Sick people,' said Elspeth, casually but her answer led her on. '*I know!* I've got it. We could make up concerts and go round the hospitals. We've got a wonderful place for rehearsing here.'

'Yes,' said four voices.

'It would be *fun*,' added Penny.

Simon said nothing. His lips were drawn in a tight line of refusal.

'Oh, Simon,' said his sister. 'You'd like it when you got used to it.'

'I wouldn't. I don't *mind* being in plays that we do in the shed, but I'm not being in plays and things in public. I'm not, whatever you say.'

'Well, perhaps you needn't be in the plays. You could do the clowning with Alice, and you don't feel shy about your acrobatics, do you? They're good. I'm sure people in hospital would like to see you walking on your hands all down the ward. None of the rest of us can do that.'

‘W-ell,’ said Simon, ‘perhaps I’ll do that, but no *words*! I won’t do anything where I have to remember words. I haven’t promised. I’m not sure yet whether I’ll be in it at all.’

Simon need not have worried. When Elspeth told their mother about the plan, she insisted that they abandon the whole thing. She wasn’t having them in hospital wards day after day, even if the authorities allowed it – which was doubtful. Fancy going seeking infection! As if they hadn’t been away from school long enough and often enough with coughs, colds, chicken pox, measles, mumps, this and that! Oh dear no, no hospital concerts on any account! She was sorry, but she was firm.

So they were back where they started – almost.

Chapter Six

The next time Jay was in Mrs. Pippin's shop, she said, 'I've something to show you.'

She bent down and scabbled for a minute under the counter, muttering, 'Dear me, where did I put it?' Then, flushed but triumphant, she stood up and held out a newspaper cutting. 'Here it is, photograph of a friend of yours. I thought you might be interested to see it.'

Jay took it.

'Thank you.' Then, reading aloud: ' "Mr. P. L. Boulter, waving a cheque which will make it possible to complete the sun verandah at the Spastic Children's Hospital of which he is Honorary Treasurer. The cheque was given by a local man who wishes to remain anonymous." . . . Goodness, may I show the others?'

'Of course. I don't want it.'

'He looks quite nice here.'

'He probably is really, especially as a private person. It can't be easy, filling those big public positions. Miss Winton said she'd heard that he'd done a lot of work for the hospital.'

Jay, glancing at the cutting again, asked, 'What's "Honorary"? I know a treasurer looks after funds and does accounts, but what does "Honorary" mean?'

'It means he does it for nothing, without payment.'

'Hm, does he! Decent of him!'

Jay found himself thinking again of what they had been told at school about spastics. Again, sympathy for children who were so handicapped welled up in him. He was still thinking of them when he met Miss Winton by the river later that day.

'I know the hospital,' she said. 'I used to visit someone there. Don't look so downcast, Jay. You must believe me when I tell you that this hospital is a cheerful place. It's such a triumph for the children – and the staff – when they learn to do things they couldn't do before.'

Jay looked at her with relief and said, 'Oh, I never thought of it that way.'

'One of the nurses used to say, though, that she wished they could take the children out more. Teachers came to them, they had film shows and this and that, and the local grammar school sent its choir to sing carols at Christmas. All the same the nurse felt that it would be good if they could see more of the world.'

'Why can't they? Are they short of money?'

'Not for necessities, but for the extras they are,' said Miss Winton.

She did not know where the conversation was leading. Neither, exactly, did Jay, but he knew that something was stirring in his mind. He asked how often the children went out.

'I don't really know. It may be different now, but the nurse said then that many of them didn't leave the grounds for a year or more at a time. She said she didn't think they

mined. Life wasn't dull for them. They were kept busy except when they were resting.'

'A year!' said Jay in a shocked voice. 'It must seem like for ever!'

'No, I don't think it does. Outings, where possible, are nice of course, but getting better or as well as possible is what really matters.'

She did not know that Jay was recalling that in one fortnight during the Christmas holidays he had spent one day in the country, as well as going to two theatres, one cinema, and a museum in which he also saw a travel film.

Later that day he knew what he wanted the Club to do. He knew too that the other Jaspers would not need persuading.

It was raining by the time they met in Rooftops. Jay sat on the high-backed chair, and passing the newspaper cutting round for all to see, he told them what Mrs. Pippin and Miss Winton had said. He told them what he had been thinking and how an idea had come to him.

When he paused Elspeth said, 'Well, what is it?'

'We'll take them to the circus!'

'Oh yes, yes,' they said. 'What a good idea! . . .' 'Yes, let's . . .'

'Do you mean actually take them?' said Simon.

'No, I meant that we should pay for the tickets.'

There were many questions which they asked one another, and to which they knew there could be no answers yet. How much would it cost? How many children would there be who would be able to go? Could they travel on

buses, or was there hospital transport besides ambulances? How old were the children? But the question of immediate moment was, 'How can we earn the money?'

They watched the summer rain running in streams down the small window of Rooftops. It was difficult to think of ways of earning *enough* money. They did not know how much would be needed, but it would be a lot. There was a limit to the number of people who could and would pay to have someone run their errands. On their own side of the New Road they could only think of one likely person. Robert suggested that they did jobs for people.

'That wouldn't be using our yard,' said Jay, 'and we couldn't possibly earn enough that way.'

'Anyhow,' said Elspeth, 'I don't think we'd be wanted: there's been so much of it recently. Mummy let a boy come in to clean out our boiler. She couldn't think of anything else that was easy enough to give him, but he took such ages and dropped so much ash on the carpet that she was thankful to see him go. I'm not going to do things that will make people sick of the sight of us.'

'And I'm not going to do dull things,' said Alice. 'It's got to be interesting.'

Penny had not said much, but now she presented her idea: 'Let's have a flag day.'

Oh yes, that was a new idea, quite a good one. She was encouraged to go on.

'The pins wouldn't cost much and we could do a little lino cut to make the patterns on the flags. I've hardly used the lino-cutting tools I had at Christmas . . . Now, if we

sold fifty twopenny flags each in each of the six weeks of the holiday that would be . . .’

There was a long pause while everybody tried to work out twopence multiplied by fifty, multiplied by six, multiplied by six again.

‘Three thousand six hundred pennies!’ said Jay. ‘Good heavens, what a lot!’

‘That’s three hundred shillings!’ said Robert. ‘Fifteen pounds!’

‘Fifteen pounds,’ ran like an echo through the little group. There must be something wrong with the sum. They did it again and the answer was the same. •

Rapturously Jay said, ‘We could do a lot with fifteen pounds.’ •

They set to work with a will. The lino cut had been made and hundreds of small pieces of paper cut out before they ran into difficulty. Jay was asking his father if he had any paper suitable for cutting into flags, and he explained what he and his friends were doing. A wave of pity passed over Mr. Middleton’s face.

‘Look, Jay, I’m afraid you can’t do it. I wish you’d told me before.’

‘What do you mean, Father?’

‘I don’t know all the ‘ins and outs’, but I do know it’s not as simple as you think it is. You can’t just stand in the street and sell flags.’ •

‘Other people do it.’

‘Some organisations do it,’ said his father, ‘but they have to apply well ahead, in writing, to the police, who *may* give them a permit to sell in the street. Even when they get the permit, it

is only for certain hours in certain places on one particular day: at least, I think so. I believe there are rules about collecting boxes too.'

Jay saw the already almost real fifteen pounds dwindling to nothing. Desperately unwilling to give up so profitable a venture, he said, 'Would the police give us a permit if we applied?'

'No, no, they wouldn't. I knew there was some over-riding obstacle to all this, though I couldn't remember what it was when I started. Nobody under eighteen is allowed to join in street collections.'

Jay sighed despairingly. How many things there were that one may not do!

His father was saying, 'Just think what it would be like if anybody and everybody were allowed to pester the wretched public to buy flags. It wouldn't be long before some individuals took to doing it for their own private profit.'

The dejected secretary of Jasper Club made his way back to Rooftops and gave his sad report. Penny was fiercely angry that her brilliant idea was to be given up. The rest, though they grumbled a little, accepted the situation.

Elsbeth said, 'We might have known it was too easy. Why didn't we think or find out or something? There have to be rules or people would be selling flags to get money for a new bicycle, a hat, anything. We shall have to think of something else.'

It was Simon who, by mere chance, produced the next possible idea. He was a little tired of all the talk. What he wanted was to be busy about something. He looked through the window.

'The tide's low,' he said. 'I'm going to the foreshore to gather driftwood.'

'Why again?' said Jay. 'You did it yesterday.'

'Because I want to. My mummy likes to store it up to use in the boiler, and I like collecting it.'

'Got it!' cried Jay, leaping up, 'That's the best idea we've had! That's what we'll do to get money. We'll all gather driftwood and saw it up. It won't cost us anything at all. We can borrow saws from home. We don't have to buy anything to start with or make anything. We can just start.'

Yes, yes,' they said. 'Yes, yes.'

Then Robert said cautiously, 'But who'll buy it?'

'Lots of people,' said Penny, who was now as enthusiastic about the new plan as she had been about her flags. 'Our parents, and neighbours. They'll be glad to. Wood is expensive in the shops.'

'Why don't they pick up what the river leaves then?' said Robert.

'Oh, I know the answer to that one,' said Elspeth. 'At least, I half know. It's something to do with pride. They think someone else may think they're poor if they pick up free wood. Stupid, isn't it, and a bit sad really if you have to wonder all the time what other people are going to think.'

They agreed that it was, but now was the time for action, according to Penny.

'Come on,' she urged. 'Let's start this minute and do it every day.'

'It isn't there every day,' said Simon.

That was true, but nobody listened. They were eager to be off. Most days there was some wood floating on the tide,

and some of it was left when the tide went down. Sometimes there was an enormous quantity of what is called *derelict* wood, old, waterlogged wood of no real value. Now and again, at particularly high tides, there was so much left behind at the open foreshore part of River Road that a Council lorry had to come and clear it away. On other days the river had a clear, innocent look as though it would never dream of carrying debris: not a piece of wood was to be seen, either floating on the water or left behind on the foreshore or on the river bed.

'I'm glad we mended the old wheelbarrow,' said Robert. 'It will be useful now.'

Joyfully they trundled it along the road to the open foreshore. This collecting of wood was a good game. There was something in it to suit everybody. Penny and Alice were satisfied simply to gather as much wood as possible. Jay, shadowed by Robert, was soon flicking stones and making them jump on the water, or listening to their rich plop as they landed in the softest sort of slushy mud.

'Look here,' called Simon, 'masses of redworm in the mud.'

'How wiggling and horrible,' said his sister as she joined him, 'but if only we'd known when you had your newt! You needn't have bought redworm from the pet shop.'

'No,' said Simon, 'it was a waste. Oh, sh, look! Look at that mallard curled asleep in a puddle hardly bigger than itself.'

It was a successful afternoon.

The next day they went again, and on the third they wandered along the river bed until they came to the part below the wall of their yard.

'I don't know why we walk all the way along the road

and then along here,' Jay said, 'and then all the way back with the wood. At low tide we could collect it from here and two of us could pull it up by rope from above.'

There was a chorus of agreement. Here was wood collecting with a difference.

It was not as simple as they had thought, but it was fun, even when Elspeth and Penny failed to secure a bundle of wood properly. When it was half way up the wall it started slithering out of the rope.

'Look out!' yelled Jay from above as it toppled down. 'You'll have to fasten it better somehow. Wait a minute. Try this.' He pulled from his pocket an old dog leash and threw it down: that too the river had yielded up. 'Fix it round as tightly as you can.'

'It isn't as easy as you think,' Elspeth said, 'with the wood all shapes and sizes, and some of the edges square and some of them rounded.'

'And some are long and thin and some are short and fat,' Penny added. 'Soon we'll change over if you like and do the pulling up.'

From his seat on a horse chestnut bough Simon said, 'It makes me think of cranes. It would be better if we had a sort of crane, then the wood needn't go bump bump all the way up the wall.'

'I don't see what you mean,' said Alice.

'Well, if we had something like a bucket we could fill it and pull it up over the bough of this tree.'

'You mean there would be a loop of rope over the bough, with one end loose down here and the other tied to the handle of the bucket?'

Simon nodded.

'It's a good idea,' said Jay, 'but I think we should need something deeper than a bucket to stack the wood in, some of the pieces are so long. Now what . . .?'

'I know,' shouted Alice. 'I know just the thing. Our greengrocer gets them with new potatoes in.'

'Like school waste paper baskets but bigger?' said Jay. 'Yes, one of those would do very well if we could get one.'

'I'll ask,' said Alice. 'I don't mind asking, and I'd like a change.'

'I'll come with you,' said Simon.

So the two of them went off side by side, the squarely-fat, ginger-headed little girl, and the thin, neat, dark-haired little boy. They talked of the time when they had first called on Miss Winton together. It seemed a long time ago.

'You were a bit frightened, weren't you?' said Alice.

'Well, what if I was?' said Simon. 'I was only seven then.'

'Oh yes,' said Alice. 'I'd forgotten that.'

It was not far to the greengrocer's. When they were nearly there, Simon said, 'We ought to get two baskets. On good days one could be being filled while the other was being pulled up and unloaded. It would save time.'

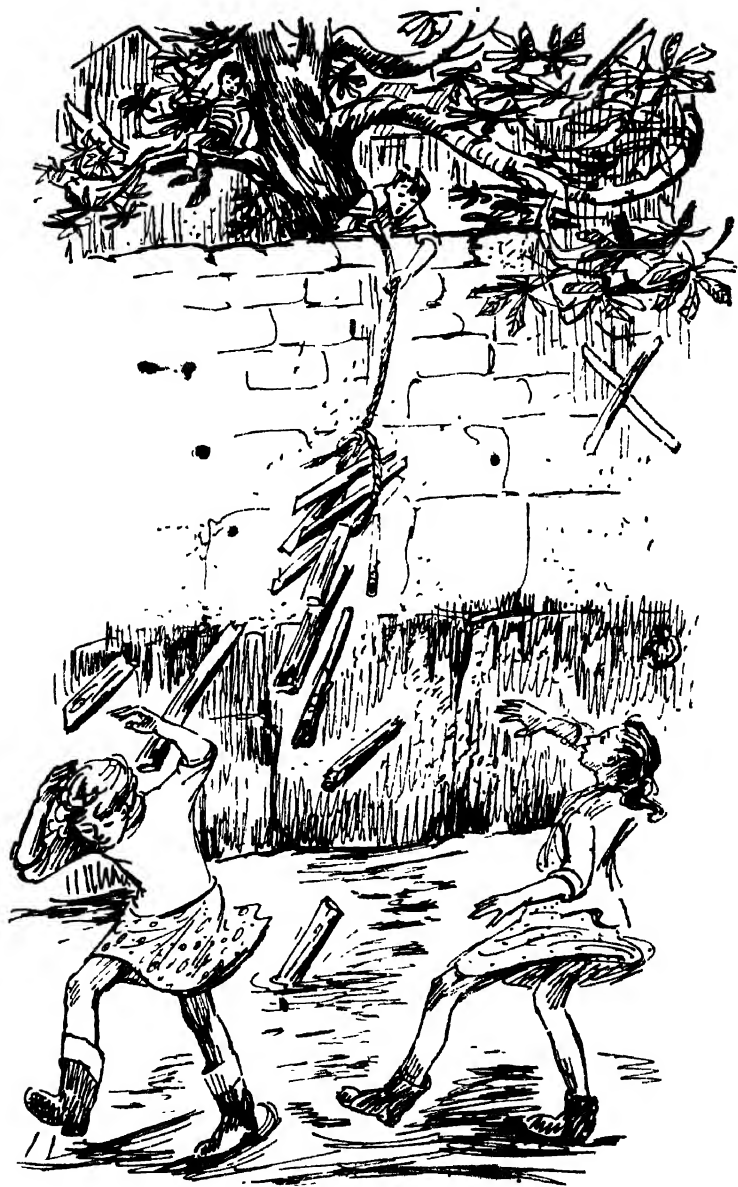
So Alice asked for two baskets, and the greengrocer said, 'Certainly.' Then he added, 'They're a shilling each.'

He was not altogether surprised at the two shocked faces.

'Did you think they were free?'

Two heads nodded solemnly.

'You see, I'm charged a shilling on each of them myself, unless they are damaged when they get here. I can claim it



back though, when they are returned empty, if they are in good condition.'

He looked at the two disappointed children. He had known them both all their lives. They weren't just scroungers. The baskets were important to them, he could see.

'What did you want the baskets for?'

'It needn't be two. One would do, really,' said Alice, and she explained about hauling up the driftwood.

'Oh, I see. Well you don't need a perfect basket for that job. I've got two in the back that will serve your purpose. They are both banged about—one of them has a hole in the side, but that's no matter for what you want. Come round with me and take them. I'll be glad to have them out of the way.'

They thanked him very much and departed. The baskets were awkward for small people to carry. They would keep bumping on the ground or they got in the way of passers-by. Finally the children turned them upside down, knocked out the remaining scraps of dry soil, and held them over their heads. Then, of one accord, they lowered the baskets over their shoulders. They looked through the weave at each other, giggling.

As the postman drew level he burst into song: 'Two little men from Mars are we.'

Alice tipped up her basket and said, 'It's us.'

The postman laughed. 'Do you think I wouldn't know those two pairs of legs anywhere? Jack Sprat could eat no fat . . .'

'Oh, you are rude!' said Alice, and down went her basket over her head.



By the time they got back to the others there was a nice mound of wood waiting to be loaded and pulled up. The baskets made it so much simpler. The Jaspers were delighted with themselves, and before long they had all the gathered wood spread in the yard to dry in the sun.

Chapter Seven

The next day, while Alice and Simon and Robert were busy working out a new and complicated form of trapscotch on the flagstones of the yard, Jay, Elspeth and Penny sat on the floor of Rooftops talking earnestly.

'I know it looks a lot of wood,' Jay was saying, 'but it will look less when it's sawn up and put into sacks. I don't . . .'

'We don't need to worry yet,' said Penny in her usual cheerful fashion.

'I'm not worrying. I'm thinking,' said Jay, 'and it's quite plain to me now that however much wood we collect and sell this summer it won't give us enough money. We've got to do something else at the same time.'

'That's what I've been thinking,' Elspeth said, 'and I've had one idea. It might bring in a lot of money or only a little.'

'What is it?' the other two asked.

'We could write notices asking for unwanted books and we could sell them. Masses of people must have books they don't want any longer.'

'Where would we put the notices?' Penny asked.

'Through people's letterboxes, of course.'

'Poof!' said Penny distastefully. 'Fancy writing hundreds

and hundreds of notices. It would be like writing "lines" for punishment at school.'

'Except that there would be some point in this.'

Penny said hesitantly, 'I don't suppose Miss Winton . . .'

'No,' Jay said, 'we're not going to ask her. We can do it ourselves. We shan't need hundreds: we can use carbon paper and do several at a time that way, and it wouldn't be a very long notice.'

'I can't see Alice and Simon doing many. They don't write fast enough,' said Elspeth.

'Lucky things,' said Penny, but the others took no notice.

'They can deliver the notices on this side of the New Road. You and I will do the other side, and then everybody will have to help to collect.'

'I've just thought of something,' said Elspeth. 'We had a notice through our door the other day, asking if we had old jewellery to sell. At the bottom it said the man would call the next day and if we hadn't anything to sell we should put the notice outside the door, and then he wouldn't ring the bell.'

Jay looked at Elspeth with respect and said, 'That will save us hours. We shall be able to use the same notices over and over again.'

'Yes,' said Penny, 'if people put them out.'

'I should think they mostly will,' said Elspeth, 'if only so that the bell won't be rung.'

Together, laboriously, they worked out the notice. It was surprising how long it took. Every time they thought they had finished, somebody would find an objection.

Penny said, 'If we ask them to put the books in their

doorways, we shall have to say just when we are going to call. Shall we say "to-morrow between 9 and 10 a.m."? It would be an awful waste if they put out books *after* we had passed.'

'Awful!' agreed the other two.

Finally the notice read like this:

If you have books which you do not want, please will you put them and this notice outside your door by 9 a.m. to-morrow. If you have no books to spare, please put out this notice and then we shall not need to ring the bell.

The books will be sold to collect money for circus tickets for patients at the Spastic Children's Hospital. If you can help we shall be very grateful.

JASPER CLUB

Not able to wait to carry out this new plan, Elspeth and Jay rushed home for paper and carbon paper, leaving Penny to inform the three hopscotch players. This keenness was just as well, for even with the help of carbon paper the writing of the notices was a dreary task. Long before the final one had been written, the first sixty had been delivered in two short streets of the river side of the New Road. Jay, Penny and Robert were still writing notices when Elspeth went out with Alice and Simon the next morning. They took the wheelbarrow with them.

'We'll be back soon with the first load!' called Alice.

'Piled high!' said Simon confidently, making mountains with his hands.

They were back soon, but not with the wheelbarrow piled high. In fact, they need not have had it. Most of the house-

holders in the little streets had been kind enough to put out the notices. That was something to be thankful for. At the first house there were two books, and at the second, one—without its back. Elspeth started trying to work out how many books they would get if there were three for every two houses. Before she reached the answer, she realised that she need not do the sum. All she did in the rest of the street was to pick up notices.

At a house in the second little street, she was just about to knock because the notice had not been put out, when the door opened. She found herself looking into the friendly face of the school cleaner, Mrs. Radlett.

‘Well, dear, so it’s you,’ said Mrs. Radlett kindly, handing Elspeth the notice. ‘I’ve had a word with my neighbours and I know they’ve had these too. We wondered who was sending them out. You know, dearie, you’re wasting your time in a street like this.’

‘Why?’ said Elspeth, dismayed. Was there to be another setback?

‘W-ell,’ said Mrs. Radlett, as though she found the reason too obvious to state, ‘there aren’t any books, not what you’d call books. You might find a few magazines of one sort and another. I know it’s only a stub of a street since the Road cut through it, but even if it had still been whole I doubt if you’d have found fifty books in it from top to bottom.’

‘In a whole street?’ Then, not boasting, but in the tone of one who finds it hard to believe. ‘I have more than twice as many as that myself, *and* I’ve given a lot to my brother.’

'Well, there you are, you're a reader,' said Mrs. Radlett. 'It makes all the difference. Some people don't read.'

'You mean they never buy books because they haven't enough money? They just borrow them from the library?'

'No, I don't, dearie. I mean what I say – they *don't read*, not from one year's end to another, barring the newspapers and what's on in the T.V. programmes.'

'Think what they *miss*!' said Elspeth, unable to contemplate a life without books.

'You don't miss what you haven't had,' said Mrs. Radlett comfortably. 'You've got the book habit, I haven't. But, to get back to your collecting, you don't want to go wasting your notices here. You make for the bigger sort of street, the big blocks of flats. You'll stand a better chance there. Try the square over there and the two roads that go off the top of it. Those two houses next to the church now, they've got books by the hundred. You can see them as you pass.'

Not everybody was helpful. Some people had put out the notices screwed up in nasty little balls and quite impossible to use again. Some of them were spoilt by being scribbled over, as though the householders thought that by so doing they would make it clear beyond a doubt that here there were no books to spare.

One woman who was out sweeping her path said, 'So it was your bit of paper? You have a cheek! As if we didn't have enough of such stuff through the post – begging letters, that's all they are, just because we've won a few pounds in the Pools.'

The children did not know her or anything about her, but they quickly crossed to the other side of the street and

came back to her side only when she had finished her sweeping and gone in.

Disconsolately, but, rather wiser, they returned to the yard with altogether only four books and one magazine for their first sixty notices.

'That's not too bad,' said Robert, because they looked so cheerless.

'It's very bad,' said Jay, but when Elspeth told him what Mrs. Radlett had said, he realised that they could not hope for better results unless they delivered their notices more suitably. 'I should have thought of it for myself. I was being far too orderly, just working up one street after another.'

The days passed fully, with their games and picnics, their book collections, and their hauling and sawing of wood. The books were stored in the shed, at first in one box, by the end of a fortnight in three – this even though August was not the best time for collecting. Some people were away on holiday and so the notices were lost in their locked houses. Some were getting ready to go away and felt that there was no time to spend in looking out unwanted books. One young lady, though, was going abroad to work and she welcomed Jay.

'I've got a job in Canada,' she said, 'and a month to-day I shall be gone, so you came at a lucky time. I had to sort through my small bookcase anyhow. I'm keeping my favourite books and storing my best bits of furniture and selling the rest, but I shouldn't have got much for the books I don't want, so you may as well have them.'

As she chatted she knelt by a narrow bookcase and picked out the few books she meant to keep. The rest were for Jay.

She saw that he was delighted, and wanting to save him from disappointment she said, 'I hope you're not expecting to make a fortune. Second-hand books don't fetch much money.'

'Don't they?' said Jay, and his voice was hollow.

'Don't let me depress you,' said the young lady. 'I don't know much about it. The only time I've tried to sell any was when I left school. We had to buy our books at my school and I took two high piles to a huge second-hand book shop and they only gave me a pound for the lot. ❀ ❀'

'I wouldn't have sold them,' said Jay firmly.

'I nearly didn't, but I'd lugged them all there in the broiling hot sun and I was going straight off for the week-end, so what could I do? However, you may be luckier. I hope you are. There now, I'll give you a hand.'

Still chatting hard, she helped him to carry out about fifty books to the wheelbarrow.

'This is wonderful,' he said. 'It's the first piece of real luck we've had. Thank you very much.'

'You're welcome,' she said, waving him off. 'I'm glad they're going to a good cause.'

Chapter Eight

The warehouse man had not made a nuisance of himself again in the yard. He had heard, of course, that the Council had given the children permission to play there. He had fumed about it, but though he hated the thought that they were there, he could think of no means of getting them out.

To do him justice, he genuinely feared that they might set his warehouse on fire. He had always had a horror that somehow it might catch fire. It was an unreasoning fear which was out of proportion long before the Jaspers came on the scene. Now that the yard and shed were occupied, the danger became to him a certainty. But alongside this true fear nagged the feeling that he had been 'beaten by a bunch of kids'.

One day, when the four oldest Jaspers were out 'book gathering' and delivering notices for the next day's collection, Alice and Simon were hilariously enjoying a new game on the river bed. A wood basket hung suspended on the rope from the tree. Well on one side of it stood Simon and an equal distance away on the other side was Alice. Both had balls which they were trying to land in the 'wood' basket. The ground between them was firm, but often the ball went wide. The river was not the danger – it was very low – but



they had to be quick, very quick in retrieving the ball before it reached the squelchy mud.

They were so busy that the warehouse man had almost reached them before they noticed him. He looked more frightful than he really was. His unfortunate squint gave him a look of evil which was not lessened by a large hooked nose. His big head juttred on a thick bull neck. His shoulders were made more massive by his hugely padded jacket.

Alice and Simon wished the others were there. They drew closer together.

He said, 'And when do you reckon you'll have got enough?'

'Enough what?' said Alice.

'Wood! What else? If you go on picking it up from now till Guy Fawkes' night you'll have enough to set the town on fire good and proper.'

They both just looked at him, bewildered.

'Don't think I haven't seen how much stuff you've been dragging up there! Getting it nice and dry, aren't you, so it'll crackle!'

A dull red crept under his skin as his anger grew.

'But you've gone a bit too far. I'll stop your little game. Don't you go thinking I'll stand by and let you have your plaguing bonfire in that yard. I'm not having my warehouse alight, Council or no Council.'

From somewhere Simon managed to find enough voice to say, 'The wood isn't for Guy Fawkes' night.'

'Hm,' mocked the man. 'Expect me to believe that?'

Then Alice tried, more bravely.

'Truly you're all wrong,' she said. 'You're always thinking about fire. *We* are not going to burn all that wood. It would be awful waste.'

Even the suspicious warehouse man felt she was telling the truth. Nobody could mistake that she meant every word she said.

'What's it for then? Tell me that. What's it for?'

'To sell,' said Alice.

'To what? Say that again!'

‘To sell. I promise you it’s not for burning, not on a bonfire, I mean. It’s for *sale*. You see . . .’

At that moment Robert looked over the wall, calling. ‘We’re back. We . . .’ Then, seeing the warehouse man, he froze. It was a shock to see those two down there with him. What could be going on? The other three, noticing the check in his speech, joined him.

Alice was saying to the man, ‘Now the others will tell you all about it.’

But he turned on his heel and went off, saying, ‘Do you think I’ve nothing better to do than stand around here!’

When he had moved off, Alice said in a whisper to Simon, ‘Isn’t he *beastly*! Why *is* he so horrid?’

But there was no answer. Jay was signalling them to come to the yard, and that they gladly did. Everybody questioned them about what had happened, about what had been said, and they were eager to tell. It all seemed to be quite harmless. They had felt a threat, but now it seemed to have evaporated.

The other four, meanwhile, had had an interesting time, as well as bringing back about thirty more books. Their plan for the spastic children had always been real, but its outlines were vague. They had not felt they could write to the hospital until they knew just what they could offer, but now, after this morning the shape of the plan seemed much clearer.

Clipped to the letter box at one door, Elspeth and Penny had found their notice, with two words added to it – ‘Please knock’. They looked at each other. They did not want to knock. They signalled to Jay and Robert who were on the other side of the road.

Elspeth whispered, 'If they had been going to give us books they would have put them out.'

'And if they hadn't been, they would have just put the notice out.'

Jay and Robert had joined them by then. They couldn't guess what the message was about either, but Jay shrugged his shoulders and used the knocker.

The lady who opened the door was small and exceedingly neat. Her hair was done in a soft grey bun on the top of her head. Her plain dress was somewhat darker than her hair. At the high neck she wore a cameo brooch.

She smiled and said, 'My name is Miss Merryweather. I read your notice carefully, and I decided that it almost certainly was genuine, so you won't mind my asking you a few questions, will you?'

'No,' they said, shaking their heads and wondering what was to come.

'How many of you are there?'

'Six,' said Elspeth, 'but the other two are not here this morning.'

'Are they older or younger than you?'

'Younger.'

'I see. Now, come in all of you. I should like to hear all about this scheme of yours.'

It was Jay who spoke. Briefly, with colourful asides contributed by Penny, he told the story, starting from the cutting which Mrs. Pippin had shown him and explaining about their two projects, the wood collecting and the book sale.

'Yes, excellent, excellent,' said Miss Merryweather slowly

when he had finished. 'I'm sure it must be exactly as you say, but I'm still a little worried about one thing. You see, nowadays, so often there seems to be someone collecting for some cause or other. Mostly it is probably – to use a youthful expression – 'on the level'. Just now and again, though, you can read in the newspapers of a case of fraud, of people gaining money or goods on false pretences by this door to door collection.'

She paused, but none of the children had anything to say, so she went on.

'Now the thing that troubles me is this: after I had read your notice I had occasion to telephone my niece – and my niece is almoner at the hospital. I mentioned your plan to her, but she knew nothing of it. She went and asked the matron about it, but she knew nothing either. You see why I am troubled?'

She looked along the four intent faces. Three voices cried out an answer.

'They don't know.'

'The hospital doesn't know about it.'

'We haven't told them yet.'

'But why, why haven't you told them?'

The answer was obvious, the Jaspers thought. They were surprised that such a question should have been put.

'We *can't* tell them until we know how much money we can earn. You see, we should feel silly if we said we were going to give *twenty* children seats at the circus and then we could only pay for a few. It all depends how much we get for the books and the wood.'

'I see,' said Miss Merryweather, and she sounded relieved.

‘Well, I’m very glad it’s all so straightforward, but for your own sakes you *ought* to tell the hospital people something. Even if you only say that you *hope* to be able to take a few children to the circus at Christmas, you have then made clear your intention. If the matron approved of your plan and felt that there were children who could safely go to the circus, then no doubt you would have a letter thanking you for thinking of them.’

‘I don’t see what you mean by “for your own sakes”,’ said Penny.

‘Well, in case you’re challenged by anyone! Suppose someone says, “Prove to me that you’re not selling the books to put money into your own pockets,” what will you say? How much more comfortable to be able to produce the letter from the hospital! Without such a letter there’s only your word for it – you may think that’s good enough, but it may not be enough to satisfy a stranger.’

‘Oh bother,’ said Jay ‘I hadn’t thought of that. Another letter to write! But I suppose I shall have to do it.’

‘Now I come to think of it, you needn’t write. I will ring Jane, my niece, again at once, now that I’ve made my little inquiry. Suppose I tell her all about it and she’ll ask Matron to send you a letter right away? How would that do?’

‘Oh, that would be much better,’ said Jay.

Penny leaned forward eagerly, ‘We’re a Club, the six of us. It’s called “Jasper Club” and this is the first important thing we’ve ever done. Will you ask your niece to get Matron to address the letter to us as a Club.’

‘Yes, of course,’ Miss Merryweather replied.

Penny gave the details, and soon, six books to the good

and with an order for five shillingworth of wood, they were on their way up the street.

It was fortunate that they had met Miss Merryweather for twice that morning when they called at big houses in the same road they were challenged. At the first one they explained that the hospital was being informed by Miss Merryweather.

‘Oh well,’ said the lady, ‘if Miss Merryweather approves, it’s sure to be all above board. Here you are, here’s a small box of books for you.’ ●

The second time they were challenged and had explained that a letter would be coming, a large firm-voiced woman said ‘Very well. If you can come tomorrow morning and show me the letter, I’ll let you clear a cupboard of books. I once ran a small private school here. When I closed it I kept one copy of each of the more interesting books we used. They’re *not* in good condition; if you get threepence each for them you’ll be lucky.’

The next day the letter came. It was brief but all they needed, and it was gracious. They took it straight to the house which had been a school. They took with them a number of cardboard cartons too, for as Jay pointed out – ‘the wheelbarrow is an awkward shape for a *lot* of loose books. She said ‘clear a cupboard’ but we don’t know how big it is.’

It was a narrow cupboard but there were five shelves, tightly packed. It held nearly a hundred and fifty books.

The Jaspers were beside themselves. Not only were they joyful, they expressed their pleasure in their thanks.

‘Well, I must say,’ said the ex-schoolmistress, ‘it is nice

to be properly thanked. By the way, where are you going to hold your sale?’

‘We’re not quite sure yet,’ said Jay. ‘On Elspeth’s front wall, I think. It’s the longest one.’

As they left the garden she shot a final word of advice at them.

‘Keep your prices low, unless you’ve got something valuable. If people think they’re getting bargains they’ll buy, and they’ll buy a lot. If you price your books high you’ll be left with them, mark my words. Good luck to you.’

They were somewhat in awe of her because her voice was almost a bark, but they liked her all the same.

Chapter Nine

That day while they ate their picnic lunches Jay said, 'I vote we unpack this last load and have a good read this afternoon.'

'Yes,' said Robert. 'We've had very few children's books until to-day.'

Penny said enthusiastically, 'What I'd like is to spread out *all* the books we've got and really see what there is.'

'To-morrow,' said Jay. 'To-day we'll open one of the boxes of children's books and we'll read.'

'Yes, let's,' said Elspeth. 'You know, when we do spread out the books we shall have to sort them too.'

'Sort them out?' said Simon.

'Yes, according to subjects – novels in one corner, history and geography books in another, and so on. Then people who buy them won't need to wade through everything.'

'Oh, it *will* be lovely,' said Alice, 'just like having a shop! Will all the children's books that are just story books be together?'

'Oh, I think we'll divide them into at least two sections, Children and Young Children,' said Jay.

'What do you call "young"?' asked Simon.

Jay, remembering that Simon had had his eighth birthday not long before said, 'Under eight.'

'Yes,' said Simon, gratified. Then he added, 'It will take hours, this sorting out.'

In fact it went on for days, not all day long, of course, because there were other things to do too besides more book collecting. It was a slow process, though, for various reasons. None of the six of them could sort the books as if they were groceries. Even when the title made it clear what the contents were, they just had to turn the pages. That might take a minute or it might take an hour, depending on what they found. Sometimes one of them would stay put just there, kneeling on the ground. Sometimes the book would be taken up to Rooftops to be indulged in, to the chestnut tree or to the wide-topped wall.

Sometimes it was not so quiet a procedure. The finder would want the rest to hear what he had found.

'Listen to this,' he would call, and then he would read the interesting or entertaining paragraph. Almost always when that happened, someone would say, 'Turn over. Let's see what it says on the next page.'

'Listen to this,' said Simon one day. 'It says that toads have their tongues joined on at the front of their mouths instead of at the back. No wonder they can flick their tongues out and back so fast when they're catching flies!'

'That's nothing compared with this,' said Robert. 'This book says that sea-horses and wood-lice keep their babies in pouches, like kangaroos.'

'Sea-horses?' said Alice; 'it sounds possible for them, but wood-lice? Those little creepy crawlies? I can't believe it.'

'Well, it's a book on natural history,' said Robert. 'They must be awfully small babies all the same.'

'They will be,' said Jay. 'Perhaps as small as the tiny spiders you find in a spider sac. It looks like hundreds, and the sac I saw was only as big as a small-sized pea.'

Alice shuddered and said, 'I hope the hundreds didn't all grow up and spin their webs all over everything.'

The next day two hard hours were spent in sorting out some of the books. As box after box was opened even the Jaspers themselves were astonished at the quantity of books they had collected. There they lay, almost all over the shed – five on archaeology, twenty-five on history and geography, fifteen on natural history, so far a hundred and seven novels for adults. It was an impressive sight, and very satisfactory.

Some of the books had not been easy to fit into sections, perhaps because of their subjects, perhaps because their 'sorters' did not sufficiently understand the meaning of the title. Sometimes a glance inside provided the answer, but not always.

Within a few minutes of beginning the sorting, Robert had seen Alice peering into a book as though she would spend the rest of the morning on it.

'Oh, put it down and get on with the next one,' he said. 'It looks much too hard for you anyway.'

'It is,' said Alice, 'but I can't put it down until I know *where* to put it!'

Robert didn't know either. The title had in it the word 'seismology'.

Jay joined in the investigation and discovered that the book was about earthquakes.

As Alice took it off to the geography collection he called, 'Next time you don't know where to put a book, don't

spend time puzzling about it. We'll start a miscellaneous section over here.'

'I'll put a notice there,' said Alice, who was still hoping to create the impression of a 'shop'. She knew that miscellaneous meant 'mixed', but all the same and with much toil in forming the large letters she printed two words: MISS ELANEUS. She propped it up, but the moment she turned her back it slipped face down, and off the plank of wood. Much later Alice rescued it and put it back.

The 'Miscellaneous' section grew to an enormous size.

'I'm sure it needn't be as big as that,' said Elspeth. '“Entomology” – that's insects and should go in “Natural History”.'

'Never mind now,' said Jay. 'We can go through that lot when we've got all the books out of the boxes. What I'm longing to find out is how many we've got altogether.'

'Some of these are terribly dull,' said Penny. 'I'm sure nobody will ever buy them.'

'You can't tell,' said Jay. 'Because you don't like something, it doesn't mean nobody does.'

'Of course it doesn't,' said Elspeth. 'You were poring over that book of embroidery stitches. I couldn't spend a minute on it myself.'

At this Penny, who had been wishing half the morning that the embroidery book belonged to her, said, hesitantly, 'I wish I could have it.'

Now that remark started a clamour. All of them had found books that they longed to possess, battered and dirty though some of them were.

Jay and Elspeth looked at one another.

'We can't just "have" them,' said Jay 'but if we find books we want we could buy them.'

'That's what I think,' said Elspeth. 'I expect the shop people have first chance of bargains in their sales.'

It was agreed that each person should have a particular place for putting any books he or she wanted to buy. Afterwards, when all the sorting out was completed, prices for those books would be settled.

Work was resumed again. For half an hour everyone was silently busy. Elspeth broke the silence by chuckling. 'I've found a dear, funny book,' she said. 'It's about how to become a perfect lady and it's meant to be very serious. Listen to this: "Beware of flatterers, for smooth talk is often sweet poison. Flattery calls white, black, and black, white; pebbles, pearls and counters, gold. Guard against it."''

'It sounds nice but what's it all about?' asked Simon.

Elspeth explained, and as she finished Jay and Robert came and stood by her, looking at the passage she had read out.

'That's too good to waste,' said Jay. 'Let me copy it out. It might be useful in a play.'

'Yes,' said Elspeth. 'If a king had to depart to a foreign land he could offer it as a warning to his daughter just as he was leaving.'

'It would sound wonderful, booming out,' said Robert. 'Let's try it. Let's all try it.'

So they gathered round. It was fun, working as a chorus. They were 'ragged' at first, unable to keep quite together. At the fifth or sixth attempt the result was rather exciting.

'Now, last time,' said Jay, 'and then we must push on. Ready . . .'

‘“Beware of flatterers, for smooth talk is often sweet poison. Flattery calls white, black, and black, white; pebbles, pearls, and counters, gold!”’ In crescendo they declaimed, ‘“Guard against it”.’

As they finished there was a rapping on the gates. They did not know who it could be, but all of them instantly looked up at the wall and became aware that their ‘oratory’ must have been audible on the other side.

The rapping came again, and Jay went to open the wicket door. Into the yard that warm August day stepped the town clerk.

On the ground behind and around the now silent huddle of children the uneven rows of old books straggled in all directions. A mound of sawn wood was piled at one end of the shed. The flagstones were strewn with driftwood in varying stages of drying. Mr. Boulter, a tidy worker himself, looked about him, bewildered.

While he was still taking stock of the situation, Jay said, ‘We don’t – generally – make all that row, sir.’

He was completely surprised when the town clerk said, ‘I wouldn’t have called it “row”’. If I had come here under happier circumstances I would have called it good rhetoric and it *is* good sense. Where did it come from?’

Elsbeth stepped forward.

‘From this old book on etiquette.’

The town clerk took the little book, read the passage, turned over a page or two enjoyably and then jerked himself back into the present.

‘Hm, very nice,’ he said, handing back the book, ‘but unfortunately I did not come here to browse.’

They all knew that. They waited uncomfortably to hear the reason for his visit.

'I am here to find out the truth,' he began. 'I am informed that you people, who were granted the privilege of playing here, are now using these premises for trading purposes. It appears to be true.'

Nobody spoke. Even the youngest of them realised that he was accusing them of selling things, that somehow such a thing was not permitted.

'I see you don't deny it. How could you wish all the evidence around you? I still find it disappointing to grant a privilege and then have it abused. You were given permission to *play* in this yard, not to use it as a sale room. I don't see how you can expect to be allowed to continue to play here. I made a point of coming here myself so that this matter could be cleared up at once.'

'Sir,' said Jay, pleadingly, finding his tongue at last, 'we weren't going to sell either the wood or the books *here*, in the yard. We never meant to. Does it make any difference?'

Elsbeth put in, 'It isn't really trading is it, if you're earning money to help other people?'

Mr. Boulter looked at her. In spite of himself he found he was almost liking this little group.

'Perhaps,' he said, 'we should start at the beginning. I came here feeling irritated and prepared to be more so. It looked as if I had good cause. However, let me hear what you have to say.'

Quietly, Robert produced a wooden box for the town clerk to sit on. Some of the children remained standing, some sat on the ground. As they told their story it soon



became clear to Mr. Boulter that the children had nothing to hide. Before long even the details would be clear.

Penny said, in a very slightly aggrieved tone, 'I should have thought you especially would have been pleased when it's your hospital. You looked pleased about the cheque for the sun verandah.'

'How do you know that?' asked Mr. Boulter.

From his pocket Jay produced the newspaper cutting.

'Goodness gracious, don't tell me that this is what started it all?'

'Well, yes, really,' said Jay. 'It gave us the idea.' He did

not say, or mean, that they had embarked on their project in order to express their gratitude to the town clerk and the Council for allowing them the use of the yard. He did not realise even now that that was what the town clerk was thinking.

'Dear me,' he said, 'and here I come trampling over you like a testy bison. My judgment was too hasty. I feel myself greatly at fault. Now – just so that you don't find yourself in trouble in some other way, tell me how you mean to set about selling this wood. Officially, you can't hawk it in the streets without a trader's licence. You know that?'

'No, I didn't,' said Jay, 'but we don't need to sell in the street. We've got orders for it from our families, and Mrs. Pippin at the corner shop, three neighbours of hers, and Miss Merryweather. . . .'

'Miss Merryweather too! Oh yes, I know Miss Merryweather and her niece at the hospital, of course. I have a meeting there this evening . . . but, back to the point. Where, and how, do you propose to sell the books?'

'We thought we would arrange as many as possible on Elspeth's wall at week-ends. It's the longest wall.'

'Ye-es, yes, and week-ends are a bit busier by the river than mid-week, but will there, I wonder, be *enough* people interested in a second-hand bookstall to make it worth while?'

He bent forward, like a happy conspirator, 'Try it this coming week-end, try it, but it's a quick sale you want, remember. Your holidays will be over before long, and you won't want to spend all your week-ends selling perhaps only a handful of books a day.'

He saw six dismayed faces.

'It could happen, though,' he went on. 'Books don't sell as fast as ice-creams. You've got an enormous collection here! How many?'

'About five hundred.'

'Five hundred! It's very creditable, most praiseworthy, but they've got to be sold now or you will have spent a lot of time in vain. Now, you've probably noticed that the church along here is having a two-day bazaar. Their hall is on the other side of the new road, you'll remember, in a very crowded area, and it's always packed with people on these occasions.'

The children wondered what was coming next. Penny could hardly bear the tension.

'Now why not see the vicar and ask him if he will allow you to have a bookstall there?'

Penny burst out, 'But then he'd want the money for his window!'

A smile flickered on the town clerk's face.

'If you explain what you are aiming at, I feel sure that he would be quite happy if you gave him half-a-crown in the pound for his church.'

'Half-a-crown in the pound,' said Elspeth, 'I don't know what you mean.'

'Well, out of every pound you earn at your bookstall you give him two shillings and sixpence. So if by the end you have ten pounds, you give to his cause ten half-crowns.'

'Oh, I see.'

Alice, undaunted as usual, said, 'Ten half-crowns! It sounds a lot!'

‘Yes,’ said the town clerk patiently, ‘but think, instead of your books being seen by a few dozen passers by, they will be seen by hundreds of people in the course of two days – people who will have gone there to find bargains.’

Jay, unlike Alice and Penny, thought it was an excellent idea and said so.

‘We should never have thought of it for ourselves,’ Elspeth said. ‘Goodness, we’ve been so busy collecting the books, we haven’t been thinking enough about selling them. I’d like to have a little stall on our front garden wall once though, to see how it works.’

‘Do, do,’ said the town clerk. ‘Don’t miss any opportunity. I’ll come and see what you’ve got.’ He looked at his watch and stood up. ‘I’ve been here far too long. It is a pleasure, though, when one can turn rebuke into praise. By the way –’ and he turned to Jay with a little grin – ‘give my compliments to the absent member of your staff. I should like to meet her one day.’

Puzzled, Jay followed the town clerk’s mischievously pointing finger, and saw for the first time Alice’s notice.

‘Miss Elaneus,’ said Mr. Boulter.

‘Oh, Alice!’ said Jay, and burst out laughing.

So did the rest except for Alice, who said, in self-defence and explanation, ‘It’s “mixed”!’

‘Very mixed,’ said Mr. Boulter, ‘but don’t change it. It would be a great pity.’

On this jolly note he turned to leave.

Then Jay said, ‘Sir, before you go, will you tell us – though I expect we can guess – who said we were using the yard for trading purposes?’

'No,' said the town clerk, 'I can't do that. Just be satisfied that you've come out of it all so creditably.'

When he had gone, Alice turned in the direction of the warehouse which lay beyond the shed, and shook her fists.

'Beast!' she said. 'We haven't done him any harm. Telltale! He just wants to get rid of us, but he hasn't managed it.'

'Perhaps he'll think of something else,' said Robert.

'There isn't anything else,' said Penny. 'We're not going to do anything wrong.'

'How do you know?' said Robert. 'How can you be sure when we don't know what counts as wrong?'

'It will be *quite all right*,' said Penny, as though that finished it. She grinned smugly.

'Ostrich!' said Robert.

'Ostrich yourself! . . . What do you mean?'

'They're supposed to hide their heads when they're in danger. Then they think because they can't see the danger that it can't see them either.'

'You're very unkind,' said Penny.

'I'm not. It's just that I don't trust that warehouse man.'

'Oh, come on, let's get on and stop arguing.'

So they went back to arranging the books.

By the end of the sorting out there were six quite high 'personal' piles of books, waiting to be priced.

'I don't know how we're going to fix prices for these,' Elspeth said. 'If we fix them too low we shan't collect much, and if we fix them too high I shan't be able to buy all mine. I've only got five and ninepence.'

'I've only three shillings,' said Alice, 'until it's time for next week's pocket money. I want fifteen books.'

Elspeth turned to Alice's pile and picked out three books.

'Surely you don't want these three! They're just tripe – they're not books to *keep*.'

'I do want them, so there! You put them down.' Then, pointing triumphantly to the top book in Elspeth's pile she said, 'What about you then? That book about an elephant is a *baby* book! I had it when I was four.'

'So did I,' said Elspeth, touching it lovingly. 'It's different from your three. Good books are good however grown-up you are. My own was given away. I'm going to keep this one for ever.'

'You're always going to keep things for ever,' said Alice. 'You'll need an enormous house when you're grown up if you go on like this.'

'Well, I'll have one. I'll . . .'

'For goodness' sake,' said Simon, 'stop talking and work out how much my books will cost. Then I'll know how much I have left.'

Elspeth passed to his pile.

'Most of these came out of the schoolmistress's cupboard,' she said. 'Threepence was what she said we should be likely to get for them. What do you think, Jay?'

It was hard work pricing the books they wanted to buy, but eventually they worked it out. The cheapest books were threepence and the dearest a shilling. Everybody was satisfied and the first money of the collection rattled in the box Jay had provided. More would be added with the delivery of each load of wood. A leg of the wheelbarrow had broken.

As soon as it was mended the first load of wood would be taken round.

Before long the box would contain over three pounds. Rarely did they count just what was in the box, but what would be there when so-and-so and so-and-so had received her load of wood. The Jaspers felt already that they had worked to some purpose.

The warehouse man in his turn had been active too. From the yard of his warehouse and from a window inside he could see the collection of driftwood still going on. He had by now half convinced himself that he was merely doing his public duty by informing the Council that their yard was being used for trading purposes. Resentful that his protest had come to nothing, he now felt that to save his pride he must catch out 'the bunch of kids' on some score.

He could half-hear the shouted conversation from the foreshore, the laughter, the cheers of triumph when an awkwardly-shaped large piece of wood was hauled up safely. It rankled. It rankled to such an extent that he told a crony of his called Joe all about it. He made the Jaspers sound much more of a nuisance than they were.

Now Joe was one of those people who always *know*, who always have a slick and ready solution to the problems of others.

'Why do you stand for it?' he said, giving the table such a thump that the glasses rattled, 'I wouldn't. Not for a minute.'

'I wouldn't if I could find a way to stop it,' said the warehouse man, and he sounded very down in the mouth.

He only stormed and blustered among those he considered his inferiors.

'Why, man,' said Joe, 'you don't need to *find* a way! There's one ready made.'

'What do you mean?'

'A *river bye-law*, that's what I mean. Dozens o' river bye-laws there are. I read some of 'em once down on the pier, and there's one about it being illegal to take *anything at all*.'

'Are you sure? I wouldn't want to be made to feel a fool, Joe.'

'Now, am I your friend or aren't I?' said Joe. 'You let me have a day or so and I'll bring you that bye-law in writing.'

Well, the warehouse man felt he couldn't have a kinder offer and he thanked Joe and bought him another glass of beer.

In two days Joe presented a dirty envelope on the back of which was one carefully written sentence.

'Take a look at that,' said Joe, and the ends of his large moustache lifted with his self-satisfaction.

The warehouse man clamped his teeth on his pipe, and slowly, carefully read these words: '*No person shall remove any material whatsoever from the banks, weirs, tumbling bays, towing paths or lands or any works of the Port Authority.*'

His ugly face broke into a satisfied smile.

'Couldn't be plainer, could it?' he said. 'I wish I'd asked you before. Doesn't leave 'em a loophole, does it? *Thanks*, Joe.'

'It's a pleasure to be of assistance,' said Joe pompously, and then, unable to resist a dig at his stick-in-the-mud friend, he added, 'It always pays to have been around a bit.'

The warehouse man, armed with confidence and the old envelope, made his way to the police station.

‘Well,’ said the sergeant, ‘what’s the trouble?’

The warehouse man, in his own wretched fashion, proceeded to report that certain children were removing driftwood from the river.

‘That’s not a punishable offence as far as I know,’ said the sergeant.

‘Oh, but it’s in the bye-laws,’ said the warehouse man.

The sergeant got out a large book and slowly slid his finger down a number of pages.

‘Don’t see anything here,’ he said, ‘and these are the Council’s bye-laws.’

The warehouse man put his envelope on the counter.

‘It’s here,’ he said, ‘word for word.’

The sergeant looked.

‘Hm,’ he said, ‘that will be a *river* bye-law. Mind you, I think you’re wasting your time, but as a matter of interest, I’ll check up with the river police.’

Holding the envelope he went to the telephone at the other side of the room. The warehouse man watched him ring up and heard him read out the words and ask one or two questions. Then he came back.

‘It is a river bye-law,’ he said, ‘but it wouldn’t apply to driftwood.’

The warehouse man protested, ‘It doesn’t *say* driftwood, but that’s included. It says nobody must remove *any material whatsoever . . .*’

‘Yes, I’ve just been asking about that,’ said the sergeant. ‘It means nobody must take away any wood, stones, mud,

cement, anything that goes to make up the banks, weirs, paths, etc. It has nothing to do with derelict river wood – old broken stuff that belongs to nobody.'

'I might have known there'd be a catch somewhere,' said the man sulkily.

'You came in here in the hope of working off a grudge, didn't you?' said the sergeant. 'We're not here for that, you know. If those children had laid hold of good timber, let's say, that slipped out of its ropes on a lighter and floated away, now that would be a different matter. We might have to investigate a thing like that.'

'Mm,' said the warehouse man. 'When I said driftwood, I meant wood that was drifting. I didn't say it was *only* rubbish they were taking. They'll take whatever comes, that lot, and the more the better.'

'Are you saying now that it isn't just derelict wood they've collected?'

'There's no telling what they've got, but it's plenty. I can't be keeping watch all day long, I've got my job to do.'

'And I mine,' said the sergeant crisply. 'I will investigate the complaint you have made next time I'm along River Road.'

'That might be too late. They're sawing wood every day. What's there now mightn't be there to-morrow.'

Disconsolately the warehouse man went away to sit among the furniture which did not answer him back.

Chapter Ten

Penny and Alice were away for the week-end. Robert and Simon helped with books when they were asked, but mostly they sat by the window of Rooftops drawing, drawing anything afloat.

Simon had had a sketch pad given for his birthday. He kept it on the table in Rooftops along with his soft drawing pencils. At first, over and over again, he had drawn only Rooftops with all its loved contents. Then he had taken to sitting by the window and drawing boats.

Ever since he could draw at all he had drawn boats. For years he had shown them with one, two or three funnels, thick with smoke, a captain at one end and a cabin boy at the other, and as many portholes as the sides would hold.

Now, since he had a 'riverside residence' his view had widened. He drew everything the river had to offer – huge awning-covered pleasure steamers spattered with white life-belts, light canvas canoes sliding in the water, little tubby rowing boats, racing fours, racing eights.

'What are you going to *do* with all those pictures of boats?' said Robert.

'I'm going to keep them,' said Simon, 'and in the winter when it's too cold to be in Rooftops and too cold to play

long by the river, I'll have my drawings all round my room – every bit all round – except where the window and door are, and my cupboard.'

'I say!' said Robert. 'I'll think I'll do that too.'

So the pair of them sat on the floor by the window and drew, mostly in silence. Now and again one of them would speak, but it was nearly always about boats.

One day at slack tide Robert cried in huge admiration, 'Oh, look at that single sculler! He's hardly in the water at all. He ought to be a dragon-fly. He's skimming!'

Simon shared his delight fully, and then they returned to their drawing. They drew punts and sailing dinghies, a houseboat made from a ship's lifeboat, the patrol boat of the river police, neat and black and efficient. They drew long pictures, spread over two pages, of tugs with their funnels lowered ready for the next bridge, towing their string of engineless barges, flat-bottomed, wide and strong, hard-working boats laden with coal or wood. They drew pictures of the dredger which kept the river channel deep, its belt of buckets filling with mud and emptying into an obliging barge which waited alongside.

Simon chuckled, 'Sloozy, slippery mud,' he said. 'Look! From here the buckets look just like an escalator. Just think if somebody thought it was one and started to step in them.' He thought this was terribly funny and so did Robert. They knew from experience just how hard it was to remove river mud from clothes. They had a very good time indeed, just laughing.

Elspeth and Jay meanwhile had arranged what they thought was a very tempting row of books all along Elspeth's

flat-topped garden wall, but of course there has to be someone to tempt. They had spent a long time carefully selecting a number of books from each of their many sections.

Finally, there seemed to be 'something for everybody' as Elspeth said.

They sat by the wall and read their books. They took it in turns to go for meals. They were ready and eager to serve the public, but either the public did not come or almost always it passed by, sometimes with a condescending smile, sometimes with a look that said 'Whatever will children do next?' Not many people really stopped. When they did the tension was terrible. *Would* they buy something or wouldn't they? One or two people looked uncomfortable when they failed to find anything they wanted. Mostly though they moved off in an aloof sort of way . . .

Only two threepenny books were sold that first morning. Jay wrote a larger notice explaining what the sale was for, but it seemed to make little difference.

It was not perhaps a day for browsing outside, summer though it was by the calendar; the sky was leaden, the wind chill.

'If we hadn't still got the bazaar to come,' said Elspeth, 'I should be howling. Will you go and see the vicar before you go to have tea, or shall I?'

'I will,' said Jay.

'Suppose he won't let us have a bookstall at his bazaar?'

'I expect he will.' c

When Jay came back he was smiling. The vicar had been more than willing, but Elspeth could not wait just then to hear the details.

'Guess what's happened,' she said excitedly. 'Guess who's been.'

Without waiting for Jay to guess, she said, 'Miss Winton. I was afraid she must have been sick of being bothered by us, but she's been away for several weeks.'

'How did she know about the books?'

'This morning, when her newspaper didn't come, she went to Mrs. Pippin's and Mrs. Pippin told her.'

'Did she buy anything?' Jay asked.

'She brought us six, and she bought two, but that's not the most important thing. She thinks she's found a valuable book!'

'Among ours?'

'Of course,' said Elspeth, as though 'there were no other books in the world. 'You know the book of eighteenth century letters with the lovely tooled leather back?'

'Oh yes, I know the one. How much is it worth? What price did we put on it?'

'We put two shillings, but Miss Winton thought we might get a pound or more.'

'Who from?'

'From a bookseller she goes to. She doesn't know for certain, of course.'

'Just think!' said Jay. 'We might have sold it for two shillings. Do you think we've got anything else like that?'

Their dejection had lifted. They had concentrated their whole effort on getting a large *nun ber* of books. Never had they thought they might be given something that would turn out to be valuable.

There was no time to continue the conversation because

at that moment a now well-known and welcome figure was making its way down the road behind its looped gold watch chain.

‘Hullo, sir,’ said Jay cheerily.

‘Hullo, Mr. Boulter,’ said Elspeth. Her voice radiated good cheer.

‘Hullo to both of you. Well, well, this is a very pleasant display.’ He looked at the happy booksellers and said, ‘Moreover, you’re looking more pleased with yourselves than I thought you would. Are you going to tell me that you’ve sold scores of books?’

‘No,’ said Elspeth, ‘very few. You were quite right. This isn’t the way to sell books quickly, but such a nice thing has happened.’ She told him joyfully about Miss Winton’s ‘find’.

‘Well, that was luck, wasn’t it?’ said Mr. Boulter. ‘Quality as well as quantity! Well, I hope you’ll get a very high price for it. Now, may I see if I can find myself a bargain?’

Slowly he went along the line of books, put two under his arm and picked up a third to examine it more closely. It was old, battered, the backs were loose and it had a musty smell. It was in the ‘sixpenny’ section. As he read he chuckled now and then. Elspeth and Jay drew a little closer. They wanted to know what he was finding amusing.

‘*Ho, ho, ho,*’ he said, ‘this has done me good already. I *am* glad I came.’

‘What is it, sir?’ said Jay. ‘Oh yes, that old book about various sorts of jobs . . .’

‘And what qualifications and qualities you need to succeed in them. Yes, there are many books and pamphlets

about careers nowadays, but this must have been a rarity in its time. 1747! Over two hundred years ago. "A General Description of all Trades," it's called. "Pray now," the author says in the preface, "What Step in life is of greater Consequence than the well placing out of your Offspring in Business? . . . How many hopeful Youths have been ruined, by being put to Trades, or Callings, either improper for them, or they unfit for?"'

'It sounds sense,' said Jay.

'*Sound* sense,' said the town clerk, and got a ready laugh for his little joke. 'Brave man he must have been! He's set out to provide information on two hundred and seventeen occupations, and very nice reading it makes.'

'I didn't know there were so many occupations,' said Elspeth.

'Oh yes, far more, too. Now, how would you like to be a mantua-maker, Elspeth?'

'What is it?'

'A dressmaker. "Mantua" means a loose gown.'

'No, thank you,' said Elspeth.

'A butcher, Jay?'

'No, thank you.'

'No, he gives a warning that "the Killing Part is very slavish dirty, wet Work."'

Greatly enjoying himself, he went on, ' "Apothecaries, Bakers, Barbers, Birmingham Hardware-men, Cabinet makers (A Boy ought to know the Use of Figures and Lines, to have an acute Genius, and to be very assiduous during his Apprenticeship, or he may serve seven Years and then turn out but a Bungler.)" Indeed, I've met such a one many

a time. "Clockmaker, Glass-Blower, Chemist" – oh, listen to this! "The intending chemist," he says, "should be not only a good Scholar, but of a grave, studious Disposition, for it is by no means fit for an airy, giddy Spark."'

As his listeners laughed, he said, 'Oh, I'm going to have a very nice time with this. I've had more than my sixpenny worth of pleasure already. Here's half-a-crown, and sixpence each for the other two.'

'Oh, thank you.'

'Thank you, sir,' said Jay.

'And how much does that make your takings for the day, if I may ask?'

'Seven shillings,' said Jay, 'but Miss Winton hasn't come back yet.'

'I know, I know, but counting out that piece of luck (if it turns out to be one), it isn't a *lot*. Perhaps the price of one circus seat.'

'I know,' said Jay. 'I've arranged with the vicar to do as you suggested.'

'I'm glad to hear it. You'd get too disheartened, week-end after week-end, and of course if it rains you've lost a day's opportunity.'

It did rain the following day, half an hour after the wall had been packed with books. It was a rush to get them under cover! It was a fuss to sort them again according to their subject. The rain by now was streaming down.

'I'm not going to set these books out any more,' said Elspeth firmly, 'I'm going to wait for the bazaar.'

'So am I,' said Jay.

That afternoon all six members of Jasper Club, taking

their teas with them, made their way along the road towards Rooftops. They had a game of Robert's which they meant to play – after they had written up their Club notebooks.

'Weeks and months ago we bought them,' said Penny, 'and we've hardly used them. I've got a lot to put in mine, all the things we've done and played at.'

'I've brought an italic pencil,' said Robert.

'But you've only just started to learn italic writing, it will take ages.'

'No, it won't,' said Robert. 'You see, I'm only writing headings and notes.'

'Oh, I'm not,' said Elspeth. 'I shall write pages and pages and keep the notebook for my children and grandchildren.'

'There you go again,' said Penny, 'storing things up like a squirrel.'

'They only store food,' said Elspeth.

Here her young brother butted in, 'You don't need to store food, you pack yourself tight every meal time.'

She leapt at him, but he was off in a flash, certain that in running at least he could outstrip his sister.

At Mrs. Pippin's corner he went slap into Miss Winton, treading with his muddy crepe sole on her shoe.

'Oh!' she said, 'you nearly winded me!'

Feeling very sheepish Simon said, 'I'm terribly sorry, I really am.'

He looked it, so Miss Winton said, 'Never mind. I I wasn't wearing my suede court shoes. They *would* have been difficult to clean.'

The word 'court' changed Simon's embarrassment to a

new and astonished respect. Awed he said, 'I didn't know you'd ever been.'

'Where?'

'To court to see the Queen.'

Miss Winton laughed delightedly. 'Oh Simon,' she said. 'How literal you are! A court shoe is only a particular kind of smart shoe. I'm sure your mother must have some.'

By that time the others had come up. Kindly, Miss Winton did not explain what had made her laugh. At once she distracted attention from Simon by taking an envelope out of her pocket. •

'It was better than I thought,' she said. 'Thirty-five shillings!'

'Thirty-five! Wonderful!'

'Nearly twice as much as you thought!'

'My old bookseller said he'd had a customer wanting that particular book about three weeks ago. He had taken the lady's name and telephone number, so he rang her up to find out whether she had found a copy yet. She hadn't and she promised to go along rightaway. I left the book and did my shopping. When I called back this money was waiting. Wasn't it fortunate?'

'It was clever, clever of you to know where to take the book,' said Elspeth. 'Even if we'd taken it to a bookseller, I *know* we shouldn't have got thirty-five shillings.'

They all agreed noisily, happily.

'I've just thought of something,' said Elspeth, 'I vote we give Miss Winton a present of two sacks of wood. What do you say, everybody?'

'Yes, let's, let's.'

‘Good idea!’

‘Oh yes!’

Approval sounded from all sides.

Then Elspeth said, ‘Oh, but is it any good to you? Have you a boiler to use it on?’

‘Indeed I have and I’d be very glad of it, but I meant to order some from you. Let me do that.’

‘No, no,’ they all shouted.

‘Come and see how much we’ve got,’ said Jay.

They all crossed the road. Jay took out of his pocket a short piece of strong wire. In the big gate to the right of the wicket door was a deep long slit in the wood. It was not possible to peep through it into the yard, because the slit was not straight through the wood of the gate but at an angle.

With a neatness born of long practice, Jay slipped in his wire. He then made a quick movement through and up, which lifted the latch by which the gate was kept closed. It was then possible to turn the outside knob and walk in.

‘Well, that was pretty neat,’ said Miss Winton. ‘So you wanted to keep your little world all to yourselves! I’m not surprised. There’s a lot to be said for a retreat.’

Then a puzzled look crossed her face. Jay knew what she was thinking.

‘We can bolt it after ourselves from outside. We can do it with the straight end of the wire now, but it’s still easier with the other end.’

He held out the wire. At one end it was bent into a loop.

‘You have more control over the latch with that,’ he said.

‘Goodness gracious me,’ said Miss Winton. ‘I couldn’t have worked that out in a year. Whose idea was it?’

'Robert's,' said Jay.

Miss Winton looked with respect at Robert, the quiet one. He was so retiring that she hardly knew him. In fact she hardly noticed him, for each of the others was so colourful.

'However did you think of it?'

'It just came,' said Robert.

'He can always make things work,' said Jay.

Robert, pink to the tips of his ears, didn't know which way to look.

'Where I need an engineer I shall remember you, Robert,' said Miss Winton.

Then, her eye was caught by the huge quantity of wood in the shed.

'Oh, you must have worked hard to get all this!' she said. 'And so much of it in containers, too. Is there wood in all of them?'

'In the cartons over there we have books – all ready for the bazaar,' said Elspeth, 'but in all the other things there is wood. We shall have to beg some more old sacks and boxes to pack the rest in – unless we empty them when we do the deliveries.'

'What hours you must have spent!'

'Oh, we liked it,' said Jay. 'At least, we liked the collecting and the sawing. The drying was a bit of a nuisance.'

'Is it dried too? This is service!'

'We had to or we'd have got rid of some of the wood before. Lots of people wanted the wood, because we're selling it cheaply, but they didn't want it lying wet in their cellars. Now, which bags do you want?'

'Yes, which?'

'Oh, any at all,' said Miss Winton. 'It's *very* kind of you.'

'Have these!' said Jay, pointing to two of the largest sacks. 'Are you going straight home? Because if you are, we'll take them round now in the wheelbarrow.'

Miss Winton said she was, so Jay and Robert loaded the wheelbarrow and set out with her.

Just as they were leaving the yard, she saw propped in an iron ring on the wall a piece of tree, twisted and gnarled at the rooted end, stripped in the smooth parts of any bark it may have had.

She stood looking at it.

'Just a moment,' she said. 'Isn't it a fantastic shape!'

'Yes,' said Jay, 'it's Simon's dragon. It came out of the river.'

'Well, it *is* like a dragon,' said Simon.

'It is. No one could fail to see it. Such a nice dragon, too. Look at its lumpy eyebrows and its cheeky nose and those wide open jaws. It must be a young one, see, its wings are very small.'

Simon was very happy that someone really appreciated the dragon.

'I'm going to take it home to-day,' he said, 'to keep in my room.'

That is what he said, but as it happened, he forgot.

The next day the sergeant from the police station went down to River Road Factory. A complaint had been made. He would investigate it. He tried the wicket door, but it was latched so he knocked.

Jay opened it, and through the open door the sergeant could see, across the other side of the yard, a basket of driftwood being hauled up.

'You've got this wood business all organised, haven't you?' he said. 'May I come in?'

'Yes,' said Jay, 'of course.'

Elsbeth and Penny had drawn near. Simon landed the basket, and then he too started to cross the yard.

'How many of you are there?' asked the sergeant.

'Six,' said Jay. 'The other two filled the basket, but they will be here in a minute. There is no more wood to-day.'

'I've had a complaint about all this wood you are collecting.'

Nobody spoke. Nobody had anything to say. What could there be wrong now?

'I'll wait until the others come before I say anything further,' said the sergeant. 'In the meantime I'll have a look round and see what you've got. Any objections?'

Bewildered at the turn things were taking, they shook their heads. They had nothing to hide – except Rooftops. As the sergeant walked along the edge of the spread-out wood, they followed him. They followed him into the shed.

When Alice and Robert came in through the wicket door he was just saying to Jay, 'I'm sorry to trouble you, but will you empty out a couple of those sacks – that one and that one?'

Jay did as he was asked, while Alice and Robert viewed this unexpected scene with disapproval. Those sacks had been filled ready for delivery, and here was the wood out on the ground again.

'That's all right,' said the sergeant. 'Nothing there to worry about . . . Is there anything different in the other sacks?'

'No.'

'And in those cardboard boxes?'

'Driftwood in these, and in those, old books that we've had given for our bookstall at the bazaar,' said Elspeth.

The sergeant's forehead wrinkled and he said, 'Are all those boxes full of books?'

'There are books *in* all of them,' explained Elspeth 'rather precisely, 'but they are not all full.'

She explained to him briefly what it was all about, and then, feeling that she had earned the right to ask a question, she said, 'Why have you come, really? Is there anything wrong?'

'I don't think it's likely. If there is, it will be a matter for the river police. I'm just making a preliminary investigation to see what you've been picking up. I was given to understand that there was a vast amount.'

'This *is* a vast amount,' said Elspeth. Let anybody say it wasn't after all their work. 'But what is it about? Is it anything to do with the man at the warehouse? He turned us out when we first played here, he hated it when the Council gave us permission to come, he's tried to catch us out by reporting to the Council that we were selling things here – and we weren't. He loathes us and we haven't done him any harm!'

'Take it easy now,' said the sergeant. 'Some folks have a chip on their shoulders.'

'So it was he,' said Jay with distaste. 'I'm not surprised.'

'I haven't said so,' said the sergeant. 'Now, listen care-

fully. Have you, any of you, at any time in your collection of wood, taken from the river, from the river bed, or from the banks up to high water mark, anything that could be said to *belong* to anybody?’

No, they were sure they hadn’t, but the atmosphere had become very solemn.

‘No good lengths of new timber that might have floated off a lighter, for example?’

‘No,’ said Jay. ‘Has somebody lost some?’

‘Not as far as I know, but according to item No. 518 of the Merchant Shipping Act of 1894, which hasn’t been changed, if you find any “wreck” it’s your responsibility to hand it over to the “receiver” of the district – hereabouts that means to the police.’

‘Wreck?’ murmured two or three voices questioningly.

‘That’s what I said. Funny term, isn’t it? I’ll read you what it says: “Where any person finds or takes possession of any wreck within the limits of the United Kingdom, he shall . . . if he is not the owner thereof, deliver the same to the receiver of the district.”’

Elsbeth and Jay immediately liked this important-sounding language.

‘Does it mean “shipwreck”?’ asked Simon.

‘That’s what I thought you’d be thinking. No, but it’s a busy word. In the way it’s used in this connection – and these are the very words – it includes “jetsam, flotsam, lagan and derelict found in or on the shores of the sea or any tidal water”’

Captivated by the rhythm of the words, all worries forgotten, Elsbeth repeated ‘Jetsam, Flotsam, Lagan, and

Derelict! What fun! They make me think of Flopsy, Mopsy, Cottontail, and Peter.'

'Oh!' said Alice, her face screwed up with pleasure. 'If only Beatrix Potter had called them that. I don't know what the words mean, but I do like the sound.' Spinning on one heel, she chanted, 'Jetsam, flotsam, lagan and derelict, jetsam, flotsam, lagan and derelict.'

The heaviness that had lain on the little company was now dispersed. The sergeant himself felt the spell of those four words.

Jay turned to him: '“Jetsam” is the only one I know – something thrown overboard.'

Elspeth said, '“Flotsam” must mean floating.'

'Yes,' said the sergeant, 'and “lagan” is something thrown overboard but marked by a buoy so that it can be found again. And “derelict”, well, it's the sort of abandoned, ownerless, waterlogged stuff you've got here, your driftwood.'

In a movement of alarm Jay's hand went to his mouth at the same time as Elspeth gasped, 'Oh, then we shouldn't have it!'

But the sergeant was very comforting.

'Technically, perhaps you shouldn't, but there are lots of old laws that aren't enforced. In fact, driftwood, especially the big stuff, is a thorough nuisance on the river. It's messy, it's a danger to shipping, and the less there is of it the better.'

'Oh good!'

There was much relief in the several voices.

'You know the pier, way downstream, where the river

police are? Well, sometimes they have big lumps of derelict wood brought in, and then what they have to do is to tow it miles upstream, above here, to a place where it can be burnt. I assure you, driftwood is a problem, so nobody's going to worry you.'

'So long as we keep to "derelict"?' said Jay.

'You've got it,' said the sergeant.

So the warehouse man had failed again.

Just as everyone was feeling relaxed and comfortable, Alice's eyes insisted on straying towards Rooftops, and the sergeant did not neglect to notice it. He remembered then the question he had been on the brink of asking when that rhythmic quartet of words had caused a diversion.

'What is there up there, by the way?'

He was very surprised at the reaction to his question. The friendly, carefree group of a moment before stiffened instantly. He looked perplexedly at the strained young faces before him. He had stumbled on something, and, policeman though he was, he wished he hadn't. What had they found and hidden up there? He had believed them when they said that driftwood was all they had found, and yet, beyond question they had something to hide.

'There isn't anything we haven't a right to,' said Jay, suddenly realising what the sergeant was thinking. 'We brought the things from our own homes.'

But the sergeant's trust had been disturbed. He couldn't leave the situation like that. He had his job to do. He looked around the shed. It only took a minute to put a plank across two trestles. In a silence charged with disapproval, he clambered up on the plank and peered into Rooftops.

Elspeth's eyes were pricking. On Penny's cheeks two red triangles of anger were brightly stamped. Simon's mouth twisted as he struggled not to cry. Alice's face was not to be seen; she blinked down at her sandals, miserably sure that she was the betrayer. Robert's face seemed impassive: no one would have known that he suffered.

There was what seemed to be a long silence. At last Jay broke it by saying, 'Do you want to get up?'

It did not matter now what happened. The damage had been done. Rooftops was their own no longer. . . .

As the sergeant turned to look down he said, 'I'm sure there is no need for me to do anything more. I have no doubt that the contents up here are your own.'

He expected to see relief on their faces, but it did not appear. He had inflicted a hurt below the surface, and he felt the desire to ease it if he could.

'It's just the sort of place I should have liked when I was a boy,' he said. 'You've taken a lot of trouble with it.'

Nobody spoke. Heavily he got down. Then, in a flash of insight, he added, 'I'm not the only one who's been up there, am I?'

'Yes.' Jay's one clipped word brought home to him the enormity of his error. Nice person that he was, he looked and felt uncomfortable.

'I seem to have blundered into forbidden territory. I'm sorry. You looked so guilty though. At least, I took it for guilt at the time. I'm so used to crime I felt sure you were hiding something of value, something that had come out of the river. I couldn't know I was crashing in on a . . . in on a . . .'



‘On a dream,’ said Elspeth, finishing what was becoming an embarrassing sentence.

‘That is what I’ve done, isn’t it?’

As one, they all said, ‘Yes.’

Nevertheless, in all their voices there was a note of forgiveness. At least the transgressor knew what he had done.

Alice, stepping forward and looking stern, said what an older Jasper could not have said, ‘On your honour, promise not to tell.’

‘I promise,’ said the sergeant. ‘Doesn’t *anybody* know your secret?’

‘Nobody even knows that there is one.’

‘Dear me,’ said the sergeant. ‘Well, mum’s the word, nobody shall. And I don’t think you’ll have any more complaints laid about your wood gathering.’

After he left the yard he went along to the warehouse, ‘to settle that chap’s hash’ was how he thought of it. He did not welcome trouble-makers.

Some minutes later as he returned along the road, he was relieved to hear that joy had bubbled up again. Up over the wall, to the tune of ‘What shall we do with a drunken sailor?’, jiggled the words:

Jetsam, flotsam, lagan and derelict,
Even the police are not so very strict,
Jetsam, flotsam, lagan and derelict,
Rolling in the river.

The sergeant smiled and passed on.

Chapter Eleven

The next day was one which the Jaspers would always remember. It started normally enough with their walking along the road by the river towards Rooftops. The weather they did not particularly notice, though it was a perfect, pale gold morning. As they passed the bakery they breathed in the rapturous smell of new bread. The river was low and quiet. A line of swans moved with effortless grace downstream.

'I can only stay for an hour,' Jay said. 'At ten I'm going with my father to Aunt Sarah's. He has offered to paper her drawing-room, and he wants me to help him to scrape off the old wallpaper.'

Elsbeth wrinkled her nose.

'A dull job,' she said. 'I tried it at home, and I was bored in ten minutes.'

'I wasn't,' said Simon. 'I liked it. I wish I could come with you, Jay.'

'Well, do. Nobody will mind.'

Simon was delighted.

As they reached the wicket door Jay had his piece of wire ready. He put it in the slit at the usual place.

'Odd!' he said. 'The latch isn't down.'

He tried the handle, and the door opened.

'I'm sure I put the latch down when I came out yesterday.'

'You did,' said Elspeth and Penny together.

They stepped into the yard: it was quiet, full of peace. The shade of the tree would be needed later on.

Then Robert let out a yell – it was most unlike him.

'The wood's gone!' he cried. 'All the sacks have gone!'

After a second's silence a babel broke out – inquiry, condemnation, frustration, fury, and behind it all a terrible sense of effort wasted, of purpose defeated.

'Who would be so mean?' Penny kept saying. 'Who would be so mean?'

'I bet it's the warehouse man,' said Alice. 'He's horrid enough to do anything.'

'Not stealing,' said Jay, 'anything that will get other people into trouble, but not himself.'

'Who then?' said Alice. 'We haven't any other enemies.'

Jay sighed and said, 'If thieves only stole from their enemies it wouldn't be so bad. All that wood! I feel sick.'

'It's such cheek,' said Penny. 'It wouldn't have been quite so mean if they'd taken the loose wood that we haven't sawed up yet. I wonder why they didn't take the cartons too.'

Elspeth said, 'Perhaps they only had room for the sacks. Besides, dirty old sacks wouldn't cause anybody to look twice.'

Simon, who had done more than his share of the sawing, said, 'I'm glad I'm coming with you, Jay. I wouldn't want to stay here to-day.'

'Well, I'm not going anywhere,' said Penny, 'until I've

sawed up and packed up and delivered every scrap of wood that's left. If it isn't quite dry I can't help it. Thank goodness Miss Winton had hers. At least there are two empty sacks to fill.'

'I'm fed up,' said Elspeth, 'but I'll help you.'

'So will I,' said Robert.

'If we were in a film,' said Alice, 'we'd track down the thieves.'

'Well, we're not,' Jay snapped, 'and we don't know how. The sacks are probably in somebody's cellar already.'

Nothing in Rooftops had been touched. That was some comfort, but nevertheless the feeling that their yard was safe from intruders had gone.

Before long Jay and Simon went off to join Mr. Middleton. They covered the edges of Aunt Sarah's floor with newspaper, and then joyfully slapped a big wet brush up and down the walls. When the old paper was thoroughly soaked they stripped it off with a scraper, pushing the blade upwards and watching the wet paper curl and ripple off in strips. As they worked, though they did not forget about the wood, they remembered its loss less bitterly.

After an hour's work, Jay went off at Aunt Sarah's suggestion, to buy two cream doughnuts. Simon sat by the front window, drawing a coal lorry which had pulled up across the road a few houses down. Aunt Sarah looked out as the far side of the lorry was let down with a clatter.

'That's my sensible friend, Mrs. Perry,' she said, 'getting her coal in early.'

Before the driver took the first bag of coal along the side-way, he placed an empty sack, folded, on the pavement

edge near the back wheel. Simon noticed, but at the time he thought nothing of it, he was too busy drawing. One by one the sacks were carried along the sideway, emptied and then brought back and flopped on the first sack. There was quite a pile of sacks when Simon saw Jay coming back on the pavement over the road, waving the bag of doughnuts. Jay disappeared from sight for a moment as he passed behind the lorry. When he came out in front of it, his eyes were wide and startled. He started to run. Simon saw in his hand – the dragon stick!

‘Mr. Middleton!’ called Simon, running in to the hall. ‘Come here quickly!’

He came and so did Aunt Sarah. Jay dashed in, shut the front door and stood with his back to it!

‘Our wood!’ he said. ‘On that lorry! You can’t see from here because of the coal sacks.’

‘You must be wrong,’ said his father.

‘I’m not! *This* was there too – you can’t mistake a stick like this if you’ve ever seen it, can you, Simon?’

‘Of course not. It’s my dragon stick.’

‘You haven’t seen it before, Father,’ Jay went on desperately, ‘but you gave me two of the sacks yourself. You *must* know them, they have a black diamond shape in the middle, and they are splashed with whitewash from the time when you did the cellar.’

‘That’s right,’ said Mr. Middleton. ‘I remember them. Wait now until he takes another sack of coal in and then we’ll go and have a look. Sarah, if I wave my hand in your direction, ring the police, will you.’

‘I’d rather ring them now,’ said Aunt Sarah.

‘Not now,’ said Mr. Middleton. ‘Later, perhaps – only if I wave.’

Simon left his dragon stick safely in the house, and then went with Jay and his father across the road.

There was no doubt even in Mr. Middleton’s mind about the two ‘diamond’ sacks, and the boys were equally sure of the other four.

Mr. Middleton said, ‘Now, keep out of this, both of you. Just hold your tongues. It’s much better that you are not involved. Leave this to me.’

They did not argue. They were thankful to have someone to leave it to.

They waited for some time for the coalman, but he did not come.

‘Oh, I haven’t got all day,’ said Mr. Middleton. ‘I’m going in. Mrs. Perry won’t mind.’

He went along the sideway, followed by the boys. All three were wearing crepe soles and moved quietly. Half way along they stopped, for they became aware that an argument was going on at the kitchen door. As they turned back to retreat to the pavement Mrs. Perry was saying desperately, ‘That’s only *nine* sacks!’

‘Ten,’ said the coalman.

‘Nine. I counted.’

‘Then you counted wrong. Anybody can make a mistake. There’s the empty sacks to prove it, still on the pavement, ten of ’em.’

In a flash it came to Simon what the one folded sack had meant. He jerked Mr. Middleton’s sleeve and whispered, ‘He put one there to start with. I saw. I saw him myself.’

'Sure?'

Simon nodded, his eyes wide with excitement.

Jay's father signalled them forward, and they all moved silently into view as the sideway widened before the kitchen door.

Mrs. Perry's face was agitated, almost tearful. The coalman had his back to them, but the shoulders were of the swaggering kind, and they shrugged as he spoke.

'Go on, count 'em for yourself. Cross my muvver's 'eart you've got ten sacks! Can't say fairer 'n vat, can I?'

He swung round as Mr. Middleton broke in: 'Cut out the sentiment,' he said, 'and count out the empty sack you started with.'

'Hey, what's this? A "frame-up"?'

His face was brazen, but there was a note of alarm in his voice.

'I don't know what you would call it, but I do know that you intended to be one sack to the good. This lady would have been charged for ten sacks, but the tenth one is still on the lorry, ready for you to sell later to-day, the money going into your own pocket . . . It's a miserable dodge!'

The coalman was saved from saying anything because Mrs. Perry broke in: 'I'm so upset. I've dealt with this firm for years without any trouble at all. The usual two are such reliable men. Have they left?'

'Both off sick,' said the coalman. Thinking to ease his situation by winning pity, he added, 'It's too much for one. It makes you make mistakes, all that responsibility.'

All Mr. Middleton said was, 'Then you'd better correct your "mistake".'

Sullenly the young man slouched along the sideway, followed by Mr. Middleton and the silent boys.

The tenth sack was duly delivered, and the coalman came back to the lorry.

'And now,' Jay's father said, 'if you find the coal too much responsibility, why do you take on a sideline as well?'

'What d'yer mean?'

'I see you have sacks of wood for sale too.'

'What's that ter yew?'

'Just that I happen to know whose they are and where they were moved from between dusk yesterday and nine o'clock this morning. The yard of River Road Factory wasn't it, on the left side of the shed?'

The young coalman jerked his head. 'I din't do it, I tell yer. How do I know where they come from? Had 'em palmed off on me.'

'Now then, now then,' said Mr. Middleton calmly, 'let's not start on another track of lies. You know you did it, and so do I.'

'Can't you stop interferin'?'

'Certainly, if you'd rather your employers took over. Or if I give a signal someone in this street will call the police. That is what I think I must do.'

The young man's tone changed. He had been in the hands of the police before. He was on probation now.

'Oh, guv'nor, you wouldn't! Not for a bit o' wood and a few bobs' worth o' coal. Give a chap a chance!'

Mr. Middleton looked at him.

'Only *you* can give yourself a chance. Nobody can go straight for you. Come on now! For the sake of a little easy

money – or a lot – are you going to turn yourself into a regular gaolbird? Think it over . . . It isn't worth while . . . And now I'll give you a hand with those sacks.'

Silently, without looking up, the young man stepped forward. Together they lifted down the sacks of wood and propped them on the pavement.

'Thank you,' said Mr. Middleton.

The young man said nothing. He swung himself up to the driver's seat, started up his engine, and still without a look at Mr. Middleton he drove away.

'Father!' said Jay much impressed. 'It was like a play. I didn't know you could act like that. It was wonderful.'

'Act! I wasn't acting. I meant every word.'

'I was frightened,' said Simon. 'I didn't like it at all.'

Just then Mrs. Perry came out to thank Jay's father for his assistance. She looked at the six sacks wonderingly. When she heard why the wood was being sold she bought three sackfuls gladly. Aunt Sarah had the other three, so all Jay and Simon had to carry back at the end of the day were six empty sacks – six sacks which would have to be filled again.

Simon, using his dragon stick for a staff, said dreamily, 'I never thought we should get it back. I can't believe it happened to us.'

'Sometimes I can, but mostly I can't either,' said Jay.

Chapter Twelve

The time for the bazaar drew near and there was still much to do with the books. The school term had already started.

Do you think we ought to write the price in every book?' asked Elspeth. 'When we had the books on our wall, we started with three sections – threepenny, sixpenny, and a shilling . . .'

'Yes, but we didn't finish like that. People put things back any old where; if there had been a crowd, as there will be at the bazaar, the stall would have been in chaos. We shall have to put the price in each one.'

'Good,' said Robert. 'I'd like to do it.'

'Well, do it lightly in pencil,' said Elspeth, 'in case people want to rub out the price.'

Patiently they sorted and priced and boxed their books, and it had by now become a big undertaking. Far more books had been put out for collection than they had ever hoped. There were occasional maddening moments such as when Robert picked up a carton of books and the bottom unfolded and slid its neatly packed contents in a jumbled heap on the ground. On the whole, however, the work progressed smoothly.

At six o'clock on the evening before the bazaar the Jaspers



were busy carrying their boxes from the yard to Mrs. Pippin's corner. The problem of getting the books to the hall for the bazaar had begun to loom large, until the vicar had arranged that one of his many helpers should pick them up in her van.

Mrs. Pippin had said, 'You don't want to attract any attention to the yard. That one . . . (referring to the lady with the van) will worm your secrets out of you if she can, so beware. She "noseyparkers" into everybody's business, must have a finger in everybody's pie, and all so that she can talk about it all over the place, adding a bit as she goes along. If I were you I'd just let her think you stored your books in my back room, or she'll be wanting to know the "whys and wherefores" of everything.'

By the time the books were in the van there was little room for six children, but they squeezed in, a singularly silent company. It was as well that they had been forewarned, for on the way to the hall, they were 'pumped' for information. Who had given the most books? Who had refused to give any? Had anyone slammed the door in their faces or set the dog on them or asked them in or questioned their identity?

The younger ones took no part in the conversation. Jay and Elspeth answered politely without giving much information. The questions went on and on. Were they going to miss school the next afternoon in order to be at their bookstall when the bazaar opened?

'No,' said Elspeth. 'We shall start selling at four o'clock. Two of us can get there by four, the rest not until half past, but we don't need six people on duty all the time. 'We've got it all worked out, a tea rota, everything.'

The driver saw her opportunity.

'Now, there's *no need* for you to wait until four o'clock,' she said. 'You can't have the public wanting to buy and no one there to serve them. There's nothing infuriates them more. I'll open the stall for you.'

But the Jaspers did not want her help at the stall. They did not want help from anyone: they could have had it from their mothers, from Miss Merryweather, from Miss Winton.

'Thank you for offering,' said Elspeth, 'but we specially want to do it all ourselves. We've talked it all over with the vicar.' She closed her mouth rather tightly. What a tiresome 'lift' this was!

'Robert has made a notice saying, "Books on sale from 4 p.m. onwards", so everything is organised,' Jay added.

'Well, if I were the vicar you'd start at three or not at all.'

There was no answer to that except 'Thank goodness you're not', so they said nothing.

At the hall the tedious woman, who was to be referred to as General Nosey from then on, made one more attempt to get the reins into her own hands. As the boxes were being unloaded she tried to impress upon the vicar that it was really too much to expect children to take 'total' responsibility for any stall, that they should have an adult to turn to, and that she herself was willing to assume that duty and would be available to take complete charge at the opening.

The vicar, who for many years had been avoiding being taken complete charge of, saved the situation without any explanation or any fuss.

'But I've been waiting for you,' he said 'to ask you to raffle a magnificent two-tier cake. Come and I will show it to you, and then you shall have the book of tickets right away. Come, come, and we'll leave these capable young people to their own devices.'

Thankfully the Jaspers got on with the job and were free to do it their way. The narrow space by the platform was a good place in many ways. The steps which led down from the side of the platform were ready-made bookshelves. The window ledge to the right was another. Below the window a trestle table and a card table stood side by side, the card table acting as a counter. There was just room between the tables and the steps for two people to pass.

'Now,' said Elspeth, 'we've got to keep the subjects separate, and we must have books at as many levels as possible. We don't want dull, flat rows on the table.'

So they turned the suitably-shaped packing cartons on their sides, and each became a bookcase. Alice insisted on covering the tops with coloured paper.

'I've had this roll of paper for a whole year, and I've never found anything to use it for before.'

'It's got to look neat,' said Jay.

'Of course,' said Alice.

Simon arranged the children's books on the steps. Robert arranged the adult fiction on the window ledge, and made 'reserve' piles under the table. Then it was time for Alice and Simon to go to bed, and for Jay and Robert to do their homework. Elspeth and Penny were left to finish getting their 'shop' ready, and nothing could have pleased them better.

The trestle table was draped with two Indian silk cloths with long blue fringes. Robert's rosebowl, resplendent with yellow dahlias, held pride of place. Each section of books had one of Robert's notices, written in black italic writing on yellow cardboard, and very distinguished-looking they were. Slowly the stall took on its final shape. By eight o'clock it only remained to raise aloft the 'banner' which was Robert's pride and joy. It was not made of silk like the banner of a knight, but it was of white cartridge paper cut in the shape of a banner. In elegant italic, and large, for all to see, was the word 'BOOKS', and then, in smaller writing:

'A good book is the precious life-blood of a master spirit . . .'

Penny stood back and looked at it all, and then she said, 'I can't bear to leave it.'

Elsbeth felt very much the same.

All around the hall there was a buzz of activity, steady here, feverish there. There was a perpetual ripple of chatter, punctuated with peals of laughter, gasps of surprise, little groans of sympathy.

'Let's go and see how other people have arranged *their* stalls,' said Elsbeth.

Slowly, critically, the two new shopkeepers walked up one side of the hall and down the other, and then they looked very pleased with themselves.

'There's nothing as good as ours,' Elsbeth whispered.

'Nothing half so good,' said Penny. 'I do hope Robert won't forget that box of small change. People are sure to pay in half crowns.'

'That wouldn't worry me, and Robert never forgets – but, Penny, I do hope it isn't a flop. Walking round, I suddenly realised just how far we are from the door, and it will be worse when there is a crowd. Suppose nobody gets as far as this corner?'

'Oh, they will,' said Penny comfortably. 'You're fussing. What I hope is that there aren't too many customers for Robert and Simon to cope with when they're on their own.'

'I'm much more worried that people will have spent their money at the other stalls before they get here. Think of all those pots of jam and those mountains of tinned things! Oh goodness, when I think of that week-end when we tried to sell books from our wall, I'm worried most of all in case nobody wants books when they get here, even at our prices.'



But she need not have been anxious. When she reached the stall next day, Robert and Simon were nearly exploding with excitement; they had sold ten shillings' worth of books, but that was not the reason. Sitting reading on a box at the far end of their little gangway was a customer. By her feet were two high piles of books.

'She's been here for ages,' whispered Simon. 'I think she's going to buy all those.'

'Sh!' said Elspeth. 'I don't suppose she will.'

Before long the customer closed the book she was reading, added it to the rest and picked up both piles. Watched by four pairs of eyes – for Penny too had arrived – she carried them to the card-table counter. At that moment Jay arrived, and behind him Alice, fiercely hot beneath her ginger thatch.

'I couldn't find my left sandal,' she puffed. 'It took me ten minutes. It was right at the other end of the cloakroom.'

And then she became aware that her sandal was not the most interesting news of the moment. She looked up and saw the customer who said, surprisingly: 'And that makes six of you!'

She had large grey eyes, high cheek bones, and fair hair done in plaits, wound round her head like a halo. She was smiling, and in her left cheek a dimple nestled.

'It isn't fair, is it, that I know you and you don't know me. I've had descriptions of you from two people, but I had to come and see for myself.'

Just as the visitor was about to reveal her identity, two customers came to pay for books.

Who could she be? What two people could have described all six of them to her?

Then a third customer, looking at the visitor, said, 'You don't mind my pushing in just to pay my sixpence for this book on garden pests, do you, dear? You've got such a pile. You know, last year we didn't have an apple without some sort of grub or maggot in it. If this book tells us how to save next year's apples, it'll be cheap at the price.'

All this time she had been rooting about in her crammed plastic bag.

'Ah, here's my purse. Sixpence, there! It'll take some time to reckon up your bill, if you're havin' all those. Would you be buying for a school?'

'No, for a hospital.'

Then of course the Jaspers knew. As the hopeful buyer of the book on garden pests shuffled her way out, they said as if with one voice, 'Miss Merryweather's niece!'

'That's right. Jane Merryweather.'

Elsbeth said, 'This is lovely. We never imagined you would come!'

'Well, I think it would have been ungracious if nobody from the hospital had come. After all, you are doing all this for our children. I hadn't for a moment thought of a display as grand and large as this though.'

The Jaspers glowed at her praise.

'We didn't expect to get so many books either,' said Elsbeth, 'and these aren't all. We have about a hundred under the table that we can't put out until there is more space.'

'You have? Are there any children's books among them?'

'Yes,' said Jay, diving underneath for a cardboard box marked 'C'.

Simon, who had been looking up and down the two piles for some time said, 'But these are nearly all children's books! Will you be buying some *more*?'

'Sh!' said Penny and his sister together.

'I hope so,' said Jane Merryweather. 'I've done very well so far. Matron will be pleased.'

As they talked, customers came and went. Simon and Alice, Robert and Penny attended to them eagerly, too eagerly until they worked out a system of serving in turn.

'May I just sit down with that other box of children's books and see what I can find?'

'Of course,' said Elspeth. 'I'll be adding up what the others cost.'

Robert came up and said, 'You know, people are strange. I've just sold a book about bee-keeping. The lady wasn't going to keep bees. She wanted the book to put on the hall table because she said it would go perfectly with her new wallpaper.'

'Ah well,' said Jane Merryweather, smiling. 'More grist to your mill, and I suppose it's something to have an eye for colour! . . . Here you are, I've found six more, five six-pennies and a shilling one.'

'Three and six, and nineteen and six for the two piles,' said Elspeth, 'that's, oh dear, that's one pound, three shillings. Is that all right?'

'It's a bargain! Especially if you can give me a cardboard box.'

Delightedly they packed the books into a box.

'It's been a great pleasure to meet you all, and thank you for what you're doing. It's most unselfish of you to have

spent so much of your time on behalf of our spastic children.'

'It wasn't unselfishness really, you know,' said Jay. 'We enjoyed ourselves.'

'Better and better.' And then in a low voice Jane Merryweather added: 'By the way, but this is a secret for the present, you are all to be invited to our Christmas party.'

'Oh, how wonderful!' they whispered.

'On 27th December, so keep it free. A local factory owner – a toffee maker – pays for the food and entertainment, and believe me, it's well worth coming for. But sh! Not a word. Good-bye!'

'Good-bye,' they chorused. '*Thank you.*'

Jay went with her to carry the heavy box outside. Five enchanted faces watched the jostled departure of their favourite customer of the day.

By nine o'clock that evening, when the bazaar finished for the day, there was room for all the 'reserve' books, and the stall was put into order ready for the next day. With a great sense of accomplishment Jay upturned the heavy box of money on to the card table. Solemnly the Jaspers counted their takings. Joyfully they looked at the little piles of money.

Simon said, 'I know now what he felt like, that king who was in the counting house, counting out his money.'

The next afternoon they were all back on duty in good time. The sun was shining and their driver of two days before urged them to 'leave the fusty old books and have some exercise in the nice fresh air' while she 'took over'. But they were dedicated spirits and she urged in vain.

Elspeth and Robert were on duty alone, while the rest had tea, when a customer picked up a battered book and said, 'You know, this shouldn't be threepence.'

'I'm sorry,' said Elspeth. 'We wondered whether to put it in the 'Penny' box.'

'Oh, I didn't mean you were overcharging, just the opposite. I can't take it at that price from children, when I know it to be worth at least five shillings even in this condition.'

'Five shillings!' they said.

'Quite that, probably more. It's been out of print for years. We had one copy in the library where I work, but it disappeared and we haven't been able to replace it.'

'Thank you for telling us,' said Elspeth, 'but the back is nearly off, you know.'

'Oh, we can deal with that. Here you are, five shillings, and I hope you make lots of money.'

'Thank you.'

'Thank you very much. Good-bye.'

Such nice things were happening to them, such interesting things, and such varied people came their way. They thought about it and they talked about it.

'I never thought it could turn out like this,' said Robert, and he looked positively happy. He had worked hard for Jasper Club, and the gain had been his too.

By the end of the second day of the bazaar they were able to give the vicar seventeen half-crowns.

'You mean you really made seventeen pounds out of your books in that little out-of-the-way corner?' asked that astonished man.

'It's much more than that altogether, with the money we

got for wood and for books that were sold before the time of the bazaar.'

'Well, I think it is a remarkable achievement. In my closing speech I should like to say a few words about all . . .'

'Oh no, no, please,' said Jay, and all the rest joined in to put a stop to the vicar's little plan.

Wisely he accepted the fact that they would heartily dislike such publicity.

'In that case,' he said, 'allow me to say "thank you" in a more convincing manner. Come with me.'

Wonderingly they followed him into the refreshment room where his wife was.

'You said you were going to have food left over, my dear.'

'Piles of it.'

'Well here, perhaps, is a solution for you. I've told you about these young people?' Then he turned to the Jaspers and said, 'May we offer you a small mountain of bridge rolls and sandwiches, scones, buns, biscuits, this and that?'

'Oh yes, *please!*'

There was no doubt whatsoever that the vicar's second idea was a good one.

'It's rather too much for to-night, I think, but to-morrow if the weather is kind, you could perhaps have a picnic to celebrate your success.'

They could indeed and did. The weather was not kind, but though it was autumn there was still warmth in their meeting-place under the eaves. First, Jay wrote to the

Honorary Treasurer of the hospital for spastic children and enclosed a cheque for twenty-two pounds, two shillings and threepence. That done, with great gusto they set about their enormous picnic, caring little about the rain which pattered ceaselessly on the fallen leaves of their tree and cast a mistiness on the grey surface of their river.

This book bears
the name of the
author